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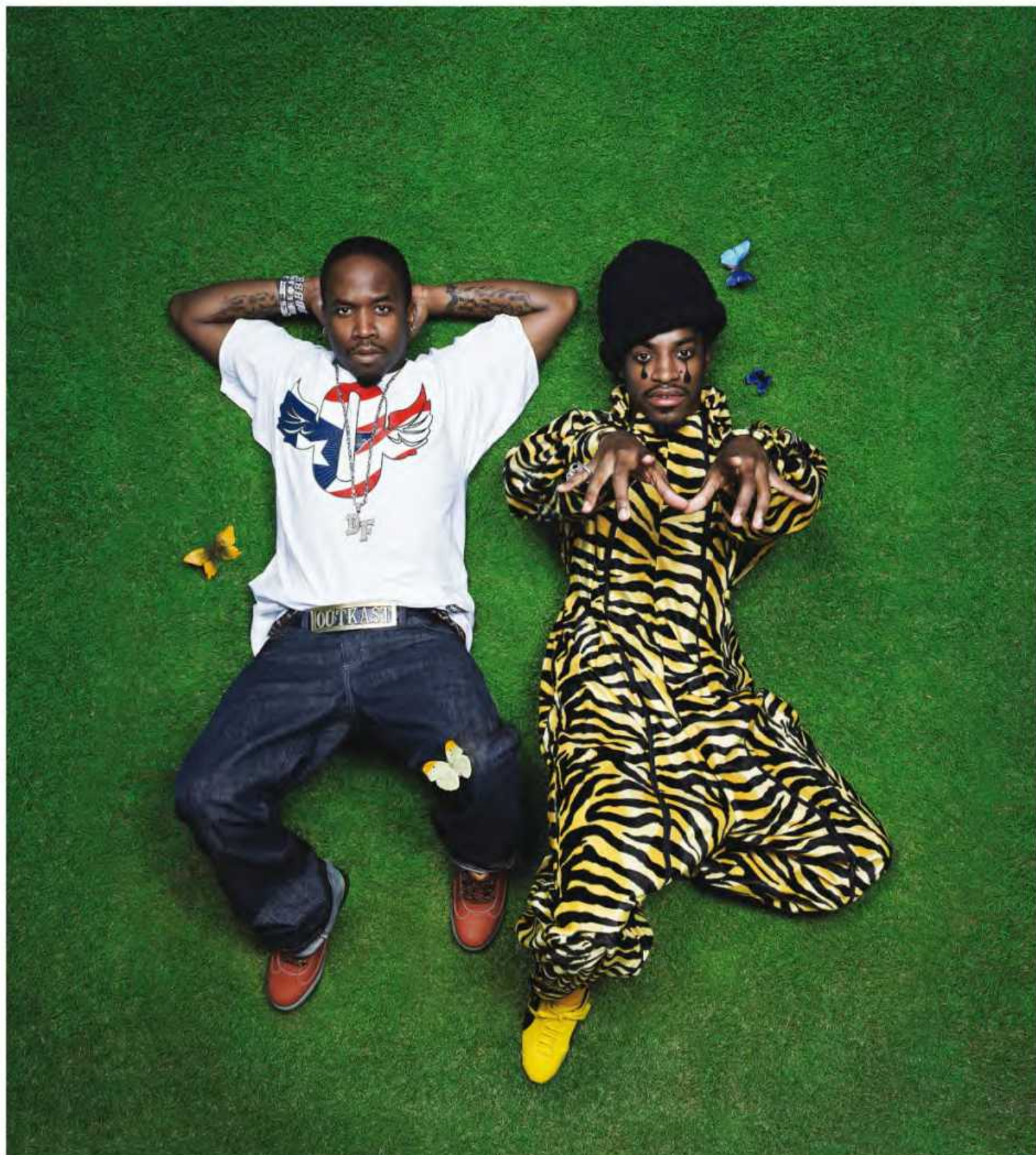
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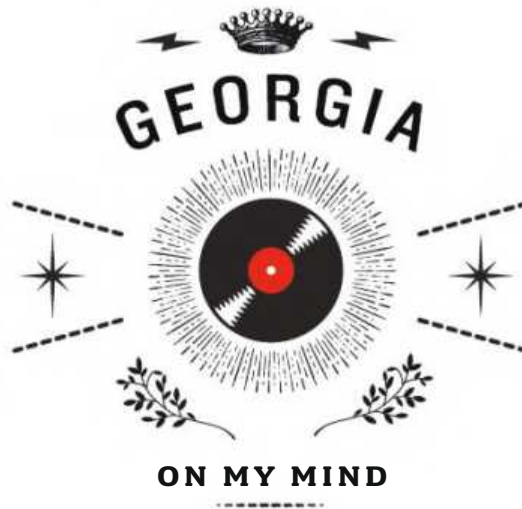
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Welcome to the *Oxford American's* seventeenth music issue, in which we take on the task of excavating, cataloguing, chronicling, appreciating, and celebrating the musical traditions of Georgia. From country blues and early jazz to gospel, soul, metal, rock & roll, hip-hop, and beyond—there isn't a corner of American music the people of this state haven't made their own. Within this magazine and on the CD, we have gathered some of their stories, in hopes of illuminating a bit of Georgia's musical past, present, and future. We suggest you start here, with track one.

## The Music of Georgia

### 1. "COLD SWEAT (FALSE START)"

*James Brown*

\*\*\*\*\*  
The precise origins of new genres are generally matters of debate. When jazz emerged in New Orleans, Buddy Bolden was the most innovative cornet player in town, but it's generous to give him sole credit for creating the form. The Sex Pistols had a hand in popularizing punk, but they were standing on the shoulders of countless groups before them. Let's not even approach the perpetual rock & roll negotiations. There is, however, at least one clean exception to the rule: James Brown invented funk.

This is a remarkable achievement, given the relative simplicity of the recipe: a driving rhythm with emphasis on the one beat, a reliable hook, r&b instrumentation. "Cold Sweat," written in 1967 with bandleader Pee Wee Ellis, is among Brown's greatest compositions, and also one of his most basic. At the height of his powers, Brown seemed to be tapping an inexhaustible wellspring of funky inspiration, and he wrote on the fly, often hustling his band, the inimitable J.B.'s, into a studio in whatever town they happened to be in. In this "false start" from sessions at King Studios in Cincinnati, we are granted a glimpse at Brown's process and his famous perfectionism. The engineer labels the take, Brown counts it off, and the band sets in flawlessly. But immediately the maestro hears some imperceptible slack and stops them, in unison, at the top of the next bar. With his God-given instruments (hands, mouth) he communicates the precise message called *funk*.

Before then, no one had heard music quite like this, including the J.B.'s. Thereafter, no one would be able to shake this new sound. James Brown was both the medium and the architect, the prophet and the divine in one body. And while Brown certainly didn't invent hip-hop,

he's a worthy subject in that conversation, too, because of beats like this one.

### 2. "WATCH THE DOG THAT BRING THE BONE"

*Sandy Gaye*

\*\*\*\*\*  
Georgia's soul and r&b legacy is crowded with stars; it is staggering to consider that Otis Redding, Little Richard, James Brown, Ray Charles, Sam & Dave, and Gladys Knight shared the same home state. But in the sixties and seventies, there was a lesser-known homegrown scene in Atlanta that produced a wealth of deep soul numbers that speak for themselves, when given the chance.

Número Group's 2008 compilation *Eccentric Soul: The Tragar & Note Labels* is an entry point—you'll find cut after cut of high quality, overlooked Atlanta funk and soul. The fiery blaster "Watch the Dog That Bring the Bone" (1969), written by Richard Marks and Bill Wright, arranged by trumpeter Tommy Stewart, and performed by Sandy Gaye, is argument enough for paying attention to Georgia's "second-tier" soul arena.





### 3. “OHOOPEE RIVER BOTTOMLAND”

*Larry Jon Wilson*

\*\*\*\*\*

In November 1975, Graham Leader and James Szalapski, inspired by the Outlaw country movement in Nashville, got an idea for a film. It would be a non-narrated documentary about their favorite singer-songwriters, starting the music itself. They began filming less than a month later. On day one, they booked studio time in Nashville and invited a musician to cut a song live on tape. It was a risky set-piece scene, and they were nervous. And then the musician didn’t show. They called around. They tracked him down in a distant hotel, where Leader roused him from bed and got him coffee and scrambled eggs on the way to the session.

The songwriter was one of the very best: Larry Jon Wilson from Augusta, a purveyor of country-funk with a swampy baritone and deep pride for his Georgia roots. The film is called *Heartworn Highways*, and it’s now a classic

artifact of Americana. His take that day became the opening scene: after the credits roll over Guy Clark’s “L.A. Freeway,” Wilson is shown in the studio working up a new version of his traveling song “Ohoopee River Bottomland,” about a prodigal son of Georgia. As the last notes fade out, Larry Jon gives his stamp of approval—“Oh, hell yeah.”

### 4. “BRASS BUTTONS”

*Gram Parsons*

\*\*\*\*\*

Gram Parsons’s album *Grievous Angel* was released four months after his death at age twenty-six from an overdose of morphine and alcohol, which makes the song “Brass Buttons” all the more heartbreaking. Parsons wrote it after his mother, Avis, died from cirrhosis. In a painfully intimate portrait, he remembers her life and mourns her absence. “The sun comes up without her,” he sings in a clear, melancholy voice. “It just doesn’t know she’s gone.” *Grievous Angel* features

Emmylou Harris as a guest vocalist on every song but one. “Brass Buttons” is Gram alone, his lyricism on full display and his grief laid bare.

### 5. “SEE SEE RIDER BLUES”

*Ma Rainey & Her Georgia Jazz Band*

\*\*\*\*\*

Gertrude “Ma” Rainey grew up poor in Columbus, Georgia, along the Chattahoochee River. Both parents were singers, and by her teens she was performing with traveling minstrel shows. Her deep voice could be rough and her range was limited, but Ma Rainey had an undeniable presence onstage, wearing gold caps on her teeth, gaudy jewelry, and peacock feathers in her hair. In an era dominated by slick and glamorous female vocalists, Rainey brought the red dirt of country blues to the glittering popular music of the moment.

On “See See Rider Blues,” recorded for Paramount in New York in October 1924, her revolving Georgia Jazz Band was at its finest,



with Fletcher Henderson, Charlie Green, Buster Bailey, Charlie Dixon, and a fledgling hot cornet player named Louis Armstrong. This is the original recording of an American standard—covered by Elvis, Ray Charles, the Grateful Dead, and countless others. It's a traditional song, but the credits rightfully bear her name: Ma Rainey, the Mother of the Blues.

## 6. "GEORGIA BUCK"

*Precious Bryant*

\*\*\*\*\*  
In 1969, the Atlanta folklorist George Mitchell came to Waverly Hall, a tiny town near Columbus, to record, in his later words, a "Georgia musical treasure." Precious Bryant, a finger-style guitarist and blues singer in the Piedmont tradition, was twenty-seven years old. Her signature song was "Georgia Buck," an instrumental based loosely on early country recording artist Sam McGee's "Buck Dancer's Choice," which Bryant had learned from her father.

This rendition was captured at her home in Talbotton in 2007 by Neil Rosenbaum and his father, Art, for Neil's excellent documentary film *Sing My Troubles By: Visits with Georgia Women Carrying Their Musical Traditions into the 21st Century*. Precious Bryant died in 2013 at seventy-one.

## 7. "RAGGY LEVY"

*Jake Xerxes Fussell*

\*\*\*\*\*  
As the son of folklorist Fred Fussell, Jake Xerxes Fussell grew up in Columbus awash in the vernacular music of the South, and of Georgia in particular. His father often took him on field-work missions, canvassing the rural Southeast for unheard music with George Mitchell and Art Rosenbaum, absorbing his seniors' shared curiosity and enthusiasm for traditional music. Jake took up the guitar at a young age and studied under his father's friend Precious Bryant. Eventually, he took a degree in the famous Southern Studies program at the University of Mississippi. In 2015, Jake Fussell released his first album, which showcases a singular combination of pedigree, experience, education, and talent. The album's source list (from Bryant to Uncle Dave Macon) is a syllabus unto itself.

"Raggy Levy" is taken from Doug and Frankie Quimby of Brunswick, Georgia, associates of Bessie Jones, whose own version with the Sea Island Singers was recorded by Alan Lomax in 1960. Rosenbaum notes, "Jake is still listening

and learning, and coming up with music that takes us to a deep place in the American spirit."

## 8. "UNTITLED"

*Killer Mike (featuring Scar)*

\*\*\*\*\*  
In 2012, Killer Mike released *R.A.P. Music*, a no-holds-barred assault on complacency, prejudice, American history, and the rap music establishment. The acronym in the title stands for Rebellious African People.

"Untitled" features Terrence "Scar" Smith, a songwriter, vocalist, and associate of Atlanta's Dungeon Family collective, whose voice can also be heard on tracks from stars like OutKast and Janelle Monáe. Over a beat engineered by El-P, his soon-to-be partner in the duo Run the Jewels, Killer Mike confronts a harrowing prospect: that any famous, outspoken black man must grapple with the threat of his own assassination. He raps with appropriate abandon, making preparations for a future he may not live to witness, as if this were his last chance to claim allegiances and define his platform. Streetwise and bookish, weaving in references both overtly political and intentionally obscure, this is Killer Mike's great anthem, the song he would have us remember him by.

## 9. "I WANT THE LORD TO DO SOMETHING FOR ME"

*Evangelist Hattie Finney & the Straight Street Holiness Church Choir*

\*\*\*\*\*  
Recently, at a flea market in Canton, Georgia, Deerhunter's lead singer, Bradford Cox, came across a gospel 45 by a group he'd never heard of. The plain yellow label looked like a self-release and bore an address in Fort Valley, near Macon. Cox bought it for five cents. He then took it to his friend in Atlanta, the gospel aficionado Lance Ledbetter, who was familiar with the Straight Street Holiness Church but had never heard these particular songs. The A-side was "I Want the Lord to Do Something for Me," credited to Rev. Milton Phelps with Evangelist Hattie Finney on lead vocal. Ledbetter was immediately struck.

According to Jeannette Finney, daughter of Evangelist Hattie, who led the church for more than fifty years, the recordings were made in the mid-seventies. Still, as an amplified gospel the song is dated to a specific period, just after the introduction of the electric guitar, in the forties, when preachers plugged in at church. This was the music-centric brand of worship that Little

Richard and James Brown must have grown up hearing in Macon and Augusta.

Jeannette says she connects with her mother, who died in the late 1990s, through music: "All the way through it's spiritual, and she was a very spiritual woman." Hattie Finney began preaching in traveling tent revivals at age nineteen before establishing the Straight Street Holiness Church in Fort Valley. On this recording, we hear Rev. Phelps's crude guitar pattern create a droning bottom over which Hattie Finney leads the choir, from behind her drum set. It is divine providence put to song, at once a fervent call for God's guidance and a passionate submission to His love: "I need the Lord to do something for me. I want the Lord to do something for me."

## 10. "SWEET PICKING TIME IN TOOMSBORO, GA."

*Tut Taylor (with Norman Blake)*

\*\*\*\*\*  
Robert Arthur "Tut" Taylor, who died last April at age ninety-one, grew up in a community called Possum Trot by Georgia's Oconee River. It appears on no map. Left to his own devices, young Tut developed an idiosyncratic flat-picking style on the Dobro, which slowed him down at first but then allowed him to cultivate a deliberate, now highly acclaimed style. In the early 1970s, he flourished alongside the guitarist Norman Blake, another Georgia-bred bluegrass legend. Blake was from his own speck across the state called Sulphur Springs—the kind of place where a boy can fit in a lot of pickin' practice.

By the time Taylor and Blake crossed paths in Nashville, theirs were the hottest hands in the business, and when they each started recording proper albums of their own songs, they did so with one another's backing. "Sweet Picking Time in Toombsboro, Ga.," a blistering instrumental number from Taylor's 1972 album *Friar Tut*, is emblematic of their exchange. As the last notes ring out and then fade, you can almost see the men leaning away from the flame of shared concentration, grinning over a take they knew was in the bag.

## 11. "AIN'T NO CHIMNEYS IN THE PROJECTS"

*Sharon Jones & the Dap-Kings*

\*\*\*\*\*  
Representations of Christmas are among the more narrow images still proffered to our popular consciousness, a homogenous, bygone ideal of an America that never spoke for us all.

Augusta native Sharon Jones is hardly a political musician, but she is an emotional one, and this story of youthful innocence meeting blunt grown-up reality can serve as an effective protest of exclusive holiday perceptions.

"When I was a child I used to wonder how Santa put my toys under the tree," Jones sings. "I said, 'Momma can you tell me how this can be, when there ain't no chimneys in the projects?'" Sharon Jones isn't the first artist to voice this sentiment. For instance, in 1994, OutKast rapped: "Ain't no chimneys in the ghetto, so I won't be hanging my socks."

A couple months ago, Sharon Jones & the Dap-Kings released *It's a Holiday Soul Party*, a collection of originals and funk-up classics, including their own "8 Days (of Hanukkah)" and the best rendition of "Little Drummer Boy" we've ever heard. Now, here is a holiday tradition that everyone can get down to!

## 12. "THE LIVING BUBBA" (LIVE)

*Drive-By Truckers*

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In an age when rock & roll done in the classic mode can seem passé (or more often just bad),

Drive-By Truckers, now in their twentieth year, have provided a consistent reminder that to "turn your demons into goddamn walls of noise and sound" remains a worthwhile pursuit. The Southern rock monster is led by Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley, with whatever third singing, songwriting, shredding compatriot can cut the mustard next to the two of them (Rob Malone, Jason Isbell, and Shonna Tucker each contributed gamely in their stints with the band). Though Hood and Cooley were both raised in North Alabama, where they played together in Adam's House Cat, DBT has been based in Athens, Georgia, from the beginning.

Hood has called "The Living Bubba," from their first album, 1998's *Gangstabilly*, the best song he's written. (That's a tall order.) Penned in homage to the Atlanta musician Gregory Dean Smalley, who succumbed to AIDS when Drive-By Truckers was just getting together in the nineties, "The Living Bubba" tells the unadorned story of an artist facing a slow death and making music until his final breath. This version appears on DBT's latest album, *It's Great to Be Alive*, recorded over three nights last year at the Fillmore in San Francisco. "I keep on living just to bend that note in two," Hood sings

on the final chorus, before Cooley joins him in a harmony almost three decades in the making: "And I can't die now, 'cause I got another show."

## 13. "AWAKE" *Smoke*

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Atlanta's *Smoke* is frequently likened to Tom Waits—an understandable comparison thanks to lead singer Benjamin's gravelly vocals—though we prefer this simple declaration from singer-songwriter Kelly Hogan: "Smoke is the sound of Cabbagetown to me." What a mesmerizing and melancholy sound that is, self-described by the band as "the queer Southern blues." Among many others, *Smoke* influenced fellow Cabbagetown musician Chan Marshall (better known as Cat Power), and after Benjamin's early death in 1999, he was memorialized in Patti Smith's song "Death Singing."

On "Awake," cornet and cello provide a beautiful counterpoint to Benjamin's aching ballad of desolation, which contains the sobering wisdom of a man who understood his days were numbered. "You don't want it tomorrow if you've got it today," Benjamin warns. "Tomorrow never happens anyway."

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#### 14. "THE WINTER IS COMING"

*Elf Power*

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By the turn of the new millennium, the Elephant 6 Recording Company was an established institution, a mysterious band of merrymakers emanating psychedelic lo-fi indie rock from the woods outside of Athens. With 1998's *In the Aeroplane over the Sea*, Jeff Mangum's Neutral Milk Hotel had transcended the popular chasm and assumed the public face of the operation, an uncomfortable burden that would soon undo that band and, ultimately, the collective itself. But before the recognition arrived, Elephant 6 was just a bunch of creative friends making music together. Mangum's many collaborators peopled a variety of cross-pollinating bands, including the Olivia Tremor Control, Apples in Stereo, of Montreal, and the anonymous all-hands production known as Major Organ and the Adding Machine.

Elf Power, formed in 1994 by Andrew Rieger and Laura Carter, was at the center of the collective, and as Neutral Milk Hotel voluntarily faded, they rose. "The Winter Is Coming," from the 2000 album by that name, captures both the wildly fun, collaborative spirit of Elephant 6 and Elf Power's own particular craftsmanship. The band went on to collaborate with Athens's greatest songwriter, Vic Chesnutt, and Carter and Rieger formed Orange Twin Records to raise funds to establish a conservation community. Elf Power is still creating strange, imaginative music, most recently with 2013's *Sunlight on the Moon*.

#### 15. "TRIED TO BE TRUE"

*Indigo Girls (with R.E.M.)*

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Amy Ray and Emily Saliers met in elementary school in Decatur, Georgia, and started playing together in high school. They formed the B-Band while at Emory University before rechristening themselves the Indigo Girls in 1985. Thirty years later, the beloved folk-rock duo has released sixteen studio albums—most recently, *One Lost Day* last June—and they are known as much for their activism as for their intensely personal lyrics and interwoven vocals.

Their self-titled 1989 album won the Grammy for Best Contemporary Folk Album and includes the classics "Closer to Fine" and "Kid Fears," which features vocals by Michael Stipe. His fellow R.E.M. band members Bill Berry, Mike Mills, and Peter Dinklage join in on "Tried to Be True," which Amy leads in her ferocious alto. Though "Tried to Be True" is more rock song than ballad,

it takes but a brief introduction to the band to understand why *New York Times* critic Neil Strauss once wrote that in their early duets, Amy and Emily "could delve into winning harmonies and energetically pick their guitars in counterpoint as if connected by an invisible bond."

#### 16. "POTTER'S FIELD" Alice Swoboda

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When she answered an Atlanta newspaper advertisement seeking songwriters in the early 1970s, Alice Swoboda did not intend to perform her own material. Thankfully, the producer Jesse Jones recognized her talents and convinced Swoboda (née Harper—she took her stage name from a New York Mets outfielder) to record four sides before she grew disenchanted with performing.

The haunting ballad "Potter's Field" is a masterwork, blending aspects of soul, r&b, jazz, and folk. Swoboda still lives in Atlanta and continues to write music, though strictly for her own entertainment. "I'm always going to have a guitar somewhere nearby," she tells us, but she has no interest in recording again. "My heartbeat is for the homeless, the hopeless, the helpless."

#### 17. "DIAMOND JOE" Bessie Jones

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In 1935, the New York folklorists Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle met Zora Neale Hurston in Florida and the trio embarked on a three-week fieldwork trip. They ended up in Georgia's Sea Islands, where they encountered an extraordinary shouting strain of gospel music in practice by the isolated black community there. When Lomax returned to St. Simons Island in 1959, he met Bessie Jones, a historian, storyteller, educator, and singer who was compelled to carry the old traditions forward. Though she preferred to sing in a group, her unaccompanied voice is stunning, as evidenced on "Diamond Joe." Lomax made hours of recordings, and helped Jones spread knowledge of the Sea Island tradition through staged performances around the country. She died in 1984, but the oral history she left behind, in song and story, will ensure that Jones's mission carries on, if not in practice, at least in spirited memory.

#### 18. "AS BAD AS I AM"

*Ruby the RabbitFoot*

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Athens artist Ruby the RabbitFoot's music was described by *American Songwriter* as "sug-

ary vocals dunked in black coffee lyrics." Ruby herself has called her sound "three-quarters vanilla." Whatever flavor she brings to mind (rock candy?), her 2014 debut, *New as Dew*, is one of our favorite pop albums in recent memory, with catchy melodies delivered in a crystalline voice that often belies dark messages about the complications of romantic love. Raised on St. Simons Island, Ruby the RabbitFoot took her professional name because of superstition. "Attaching that kind of thing to yourself can't hurt," she's said by way of an explanation. "As Bad as I Am" is a veiled take on that most basic pop preoccupation: unrequited love. You can almost hear the tongue in her cheek.

#### 19. "I'VE GOT DREAMS TO REMEMBER (ROUGHER DREAMS)"

*Otis Redding*

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What is left to say about this man from Dawson, Georgia, who didn't live to see twenty-seven, yet managed to so profoundly influence the landscape of American music? Otis Redding was an excellent songwriter and a wonderful performer, but we enshrine him most of all for his staggering emotional fluency. Redding's voice had a primal rawness, and he used it to convey the essence of heartache, ecstasy, desire, and joy. He could wholly inhabit planes of feeling at will, for a few minutes at a time. In this moody outtake of his posthumous hit "I've Got Dreams to Remember"—a version referred to as "Rougher Dreams" for its darker lyrics—we get despair. It is the only song he cowrote with his wife, Zelma, based on a poem she wrote while he was away on tour. It sounds like it hurt coming out.

#### 20. "AQUEMINI" OutKast

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This past September, the *New York Times* put the twenty-four-year-old rapper Young Thug on the cover of its annual Fall Arts Preview section. The writer discussed his consistent self-reinvention and declared him hip-hop's "most challenging and thrilling" artist. What wasn't mentioned is that Young Thug hails from Atlanta. Because why would it be? Many of the genre's great innovators have come out of the ATL; it's the epicenter of the hip-hop universe. The omission would have been unimaginable twenty years ago, when New York City and Los Angeles were the only known galaxies in that



sky. Then something shifted: OutKast happened—and their emergence was as monumental to the genre as Copernicus to astronomy.

“Aquemini” is the title track from OutKast’s seminal third album, released in 1998. By this point, the duo of Big Boi and André 3000 had established their Georgia roots (*Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*, 1994) and their otherworldly ambitions (*ATLiens*, 1996) under the guidance of the Atlanta production trio Organized Noize. With *Aquemini*, knowing that they were only as funky as their last cut (“You focus on the past, your ass’ll be a has what”), Big and Dre took on more of the production duties and achieved their purest vision as a duo. “For Southern music, period, it meant nothing was the same,” Killer Mike told *XXL* magazine in 2013. “*Aquemini* progressed our music twenty years.”

The song itself is an object lesson. The table is set with moody guitars, a laid-back bass line, and a simple rimshot drumbeat punctuated by a repeating blast of horns—with enough mysterious sounds underneath to make Lee “Scratch” Perry turn his head. In alternating verses, the rappers

break bread, cementing the binary mythology of OutKast. Big Boi (Aquarius): “We missed a lot of *church* so the music is our confessional.” André 3000 (Gemini): “Sin all depends on what you believing in / Faith is what you make it.”

Any notes on “Aquemini” must also take heed of André’s closing verse—the meter, the message, the mind. Be not afraid of greatness. Hear him, revolve.

## 21. “LONESOME ATLANTA BLUES”

*Bobby Grant*

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**Bobby Grant is a mystery** of the 78-rpm era. Facts are scarce. He made one record, a pair of slide-guitar country-blues numbers: “Nappy Head Blues” backed with “Lonesome Atlanta Blues.” According to the matrices kept by Paramount Records, Grant recorded the sides in Chicago circa December 1927. His name appears again as the possible guitar accompanist on Ruby Paul’s B-side “Last Farewell Blues,” recorded around the same time. Collectors, historians,

and conspiracists have proffered a variety of theories about Grant in the quarters of the Internet where these debates tend to unfold. Could he be Georgian Barbecue Bob (Robert Hicks), employing a one-time pseudonym to duck contractual obligations with Columbia Records? Or perhaps another name assumed by Joe Holmes, the Mississippian who recorded the four Paramount sides credited to King Solomon Hill? Some hear Alabama in the playing technique, others the Delta. The mystery is further convoluted by an inconvenient but unavoidable piece of evidence: the voices on Grant’s two sides are markedly different.

Whoever wrote (and sang?) “Lonesome Atlanta Blues” seems familiar with the city—and with missing it, as he longs to be back there “down on Decatur Street,” the infamous heart of Atlanta’s African-American district. It is neither the most lonesome country blues song nor the most emblematic of Atlanta, and the playing and singing is not exceptional next to, say, Blind Willie McTell. But “Lonesome Atlanta Blues” is a mysteriously beautiful time



capsule worthy of examination nearly a century on. Whether his “dirty old feeling” was the sadness of a lifetime or just an afternoon blues, “Bobby Grant” captured the feeling of being far from home, alone.

## 22. “RECENT TITLE” *Pylon*

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**Pylon’s ambivalence about being a band** is far from apparent in the tight power of their records or the energy of their live performances. Nor would you expect, based on their status as progenitors of Athens’s storied music scene, that singer Vanessa Briscoe “never planned on being a musician.” In fact, it seemed that none of them did. The members of Pylon were artists in the first instance, and saw playing music as yet another means of creating art. They kept at it as long as it was fun, releasing only two records before disbanding in 1983.

If “Recent Title” had been included on their 1980 debut, *Gyrate*, for which it was recorded, fans might have picked up on the lyrical clues. It is a defiant stand against obligation, against doing anything at all. “I can do what I want to,” Briscoe sings without irony. “I can say anything I

want to about anybody, or I can just stand here.” The song culminates with a livelier message: let’s dance.

## 23. “MIDNIGHT RIDER”

*Allman Brothers Band*

\*\*\*\*\*  
**We’ve placed one of the** most recognizable rock & roll songs ever made toward the end of the CD to lend it some needed contextual freshness, like a fat red rose in a bouquet. If you can listen to this song anew, what you’ll hear is the birth of Southern rock—body and soul. There’s a reason “Midnight Rider” is a fixed point in the trajectory of rock music. The Allman Brothers Band had something the likes of which has not been heard before or since. As was written in Vicksburg: REMEMBER DUANE ALLMAN.

## 24. “MIDNIGHT” *Futurebirds*

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**By 1962, Ray Charles was** the king of r&b, perhaps the most famous black man in the world, and among the most revered musicians working

in any genre. That is to say: he could do anything he pleased. So he went to Nashville and made two albums of country standards, reimagined in the Ray Charles way. *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* and its follow-up, *Volume Two*, are massive genre-bending achievements. They even stand out in a career as staggering as his.

“Midnight,” from the second album, was written by a pair of songwriting legends with ties to Georgia, Boudleaux Bryant and Chet Atkins, and had already been made famous three times over by country stars in the 1950s. Ray transformed it. We’ve taken the song a step further by asking the Athens rockers Futurebirds to try it on. In this recording, made especially for the *Oxford American’s* Georgia Music issue, Futurebirds proved up to task, washing Charles’s rendition in a lovely psychedelic haze.

“My granddad gave me his copy of *Modern Sounds Two* about six years ago, and ‘Midnight’ is the song I always come back to,” singer Thomas Johnson said. “The track is so moody and groovy. We hope we did the song justice.”

## 25. “MOON RIVER” (1961 DEMO)

*Henry Mancini & Johnny Mercer*

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**Sometime in the winter or spring of 1961,** Henry Mancini composed the tune for what would become one of the most recognizable songs of all time, thanks to Audrey Hepburn and *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. The words she sang from that windowsill were written by the great lyricist Johnny Mercer, inspired by memories of his childhood on the Vernon River, an inlet south of Savannah. Genius loves company.

Since they only composed “Moon River” for the film, it was believed that Mancini and Mercer never actually recorded the song together, but in the fall of 2014, Chris Mancini found an acetate demo recording among a box of his father’s things in the attic: Mancini and Mercer, piano and vocals. It’s not hard to imagine the men cutting this take the moment they’d finished writing the song, the melody yet unproven, the ink barely dry on the lyrics. Here it is, my huckleberry friends: the spectacular first take of an American musical masterpiece. 🍷

Liner notes by Maxwell George, with additional research by Eliza Borné and Grant Taylor. The *Oxford American* would like to thank the creators and rights holders of these songs for allowing us to reproduce their music. Detailed credits can be found on p. 175.

Our deep gratitude extends especially to three Georgians—David Barbe, Lance Ledbetter, and Lisa Love—who were instrumental in the creation of this project.

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# Searching the Desert for the Blues

BY

PETER GURALNICK

**B**lues really was the transformation of my life.

When I was fifteen or sixteen, a friend and I just kind of stumbled onto the music. It was the beginning of the folk revival—1959 or 1960—and somehow in the midst of all that wholesomeness, we fell into the blues.

To this day I don't know what it was exactly—I had never heard anything quite like it. But it just grabbed me. It completely turned me around. Lightnin' Hopkins and Big Bill Broonzy, Leadbelly and Blind Lemon Jefferson. Muddy Waters and Little Walter and Howlin' Wolf. And Blind Willie McTell.

Now, they were all wonderful. Truly wonderful, in the sense of “full of wonder”—which was the state in which my friend and I perpetually found ourselves as we listened, open-mouthed, to the music. Maybe it was the directness of the conversation. Maybe it was the stark, unadorned and unenhanced reality that each of these artists embraced, reality in all of its multifarious beauty, ugliness, and undifferentiated truth.

There was something about the way in which harsh facts could be transmuted into metaphor, pain into joy, a simple three- or four-chord structure and AAB verse that almost anybody could grasp was able to open up into an unfathomable realm of exploration that I had never encountered before. Well, let me quote James Baldwin, whom I read at almost exactly the same time, on the uplifting song of a community in which imagination and self-invention trumped pedigree, in which there existed what Baldwin calls “a zest and a joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disaster . . . very moving and very rare. Perhaps we were all of us,” he reflected in *The Fire Next Time*, “pimps, whores, racketeers, church members and children—bound together

by the nature of our oppression.” If so, it was that inescapably shared heritage, Baldwin went on, that helped create the dynamic that allowed one “to respect and rejoice in . . . life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread.”

In other words, the indomitable spirit, among other things, of the blues. It was, as Baldwin wrote in his short story “Sonny's Blues,” a tale that is “never new [but] must always be heard . . . it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.”

But for all that commonality of spirit—and the blues truly is a shared heritage in a sense that few are willing to recognize in this proprietary age: “NOBODY,” as Bob Dylan proclaimed, “can sing the blues like Blind Willie McTell.”

**L**et me give you a little bit of our take on Blind Willie McTell—his music, not the myth that we constructed from it. (I'll get to the myth in a moment.) The first song I ever heard by Blind Willie McTell was his masterpiece, “Statesboro Blues,” though so many of his songs can rightly be called masterpieces. What was so striking about “Statesboro Blues,” then and now, was its utter unclassifiability. I suppose that's true of all great art, from Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Johnson, from Alice Munro to Howlin' Wolf. But the thing about “Statesboro Blues” was that, as much as you might be able to locate some of its disparate elements—the “going up the country” theme, for example, seems to have originated with Sippie Wallace (though who knows where Sippie Wallace got it from)—there was no Venn diagram, there was no blueprint that could tell you how to put it all back together again.

Propelled by McTell's ringing, delicately accented twelve-string guitar, “Statesboro Blues” is an epic tale of dislocation and commonality (“Brother got 'em, friends got 'em / I got 'em / Woke up this morning, we had them Statesboro blues / I looked over in the corner / Grandma and Grandpa had 'em, too”) that's most familiar to contemporary listeners in the Allman Brothers' inexorably anthemic version. Here, though, it is presented with such charm, such casual beauty, such utter lack of predictability—lyrical, metrical, thematic—that it surprises every time. There's a plaintiveness, too, not normally associated with the blues, not just in the high, slightly nasal voice that delivers the lyrics with an uncommon purity and precision but in the lilting, melodic approach to a number that still possesses as much inarguable authenticity as the most affecting of “deep blues.”

I think that was what intrigued me most about

Blind Willie McTell's work—the way in which it could combine both unapologetic winsomeness and undisguised profundity. It was clever, it could suggest grace, humor, sexual suggestiveness, sometimes even menace—all with equal authority. But at its heart, it possessed a core of both delicacy and tensile strength; McTell brought to it a subtlety of approach rarely associated with the powerhouse impact of the twelve-string guitar. Above all, he displayed a breadth of imagination that allowed him to cover virtually every aspect not just of the African-American experience but of the entire American vernacular tradition.

He sang everything from blues to ragtime to popular songs of the day and sentimental numbers of yesteryear, from hillbilly yodels to way-back spirituals and moans, in addition, of course, to one of his specialties, a breezy form of *recitatif* that could pass for the rap of its day. And he could do it all at the drop of a hat. He could play the part of a pimp, a gambler, a nightclub roué, or a roving cowboy—with wit, imagination, a knowing wink of complicity, or an air of irrefutable authority. Or he could provide us with a sly original like “Travelin' Blues,” which takes us on a tour of what he calls “South America” (in other words, the American South), with all of its implicit allusions to the lives that were led, the stories that could be told, even as the guitar summons up the sounds of the landscape, and the crying of the slide guitar suggests a whole unspoken subtext lying just beneath the surface.

In 1940, he recorded a tantalizing session for the Library of Congress that came about only because folklorist John Lomax's wife, Ruby, spotted “a Negro man with a guitar” at the Pig 'n Whistle barbecue stand (Pig 'n Whistle Red was another one of his latter-day sobriquets) and Blind Willie agreed to record some numbers, since business at the drive-in was slow. The result was a *mélange* of folk songs, rags, spirituals, pop, and pre-blues material, interspersed with monologues revealing not just his astonishing powers of recall but an analytic approach to what John Lomax labeled “history of the blues [and] life as a maker of records.”

Just listening to a little bit of this interview—with the understanding that Blind Willie felt, for good reason, I think, that his interviewer was trying to put him in a “trick bag” (Lomax was doing his very best to get songs of social protest out of his subject, something I would imagine McTell might have considered bad for business)—provides a fascinating glimpse not only of a career in music but of a reflective and



highly individuated life, and one can only wish there could have been more. But we are at least hearing the real voice of Blind Willie McTell. Or, one is led sometimes to wonder by the sly confidence with which he presents his conclusions (“I am talking about the days of years ago—how from 19 and 8 on up . . . blues have started to be original”), are we?

But I said before I was going to talk a little bit about the myth we built up around him. Well, I know this is going to sound silly, but the Blind

Willie McTell we constructed when we first encountered him was kind of like a ghost rider who, whatever his real-life state of corporeality, would go on forever, in defiance of all the immutable laws of human existence. I know, I know. I said this was going to sound silly. And, of course, it was based on a number of serious fundamental misconceptions—but most of all it was based on the power of the music and the romantic illusion that I still fall back on from time to time: that the dauntless, unvanquishable

spirit that created all that music, that propelled Blind Willie and Blind Samuel and Barrelhouse Sammy (The Country Boy) and Hot Shot Willie into all those recording sessions, could somehow never be stilled. Because one of the most remarkable facts about the actual life of Blind Willie McTell—and this was about the only fact that we knew about him for a long time—was that he continued to record year after year, decade after decade, from his first session for Victor in 1927 (“I continued my playing up until 19



and 27, the 18th day of October, when I made records for the Victor Record people”) to his last for an Atlanta record store owner in 1956. And this was without hits to sustain him, without the kind of record company enthusiasm that a first-generation blues star like Blind Lemon Jefferson or later ones like Leroy Carr or Big Bill Broonzy would receive, and, perhaps most important, without the kind of posthumous boost you’re likely to attract if word gets around that you have sold your soul to the devil, as it did for Robert Johnson some thirty years after his death.

Blind Willie McTell simply kept showing up—and showing up under all those unlikely pseudonyms. I mean, how could anyone that determined not to go away ever die? And how were we to know that in fact he *had* died shortly before we even discovered his music? We certainly could never have guessed that his real name was McTier, or McTear—or dreamt that he made a decent living from his craft (for many years he played regularly for the white patrons of the Pig ’n Whistle where John Lomax found him, as well as for black audiences at the famed 81 Theatre in Atlanta).

Because Blind Willie McTell was in fact a professional *entertainer*. Even more to the point, he was something we could never have imagined at the time: a well-educated, well-read, self-sufficient bluesman, who, as blues scholar David Evans has pointed out, put his wife, Kate, through nursing school, had a solid, supportive network of family and friends to sustain him in good times and bad, and led a life that in our youthful naiveté it would have been almost impossible for us to conceive of, a life that incorporated both order and art.

Well, it’s *still* a little difficult to conceive of, and if it was our naiveté then, to some extent it continues to be a commonplace misconception, simply because, as blues singer Johnny Shines once said, so many who profess to love the blues insist that it is nothing more than a primitive music, its practitioners outcasts by both choice and definition, though Johnny Shines for one didn’t consider himself an outcast in the least. “I play the blues,” he said, “but I don’t feel that the blues is dirty. Society decided *for* us that the blues was dirty.” And he was determined to disprove that notion, he said, by consciously and illuminatingly carrying the music on.

At some point in my own education I discovered the limitations of just theorizing about the music—sitting in your room and mulling over lyrics you could never fully

decipher or going to see Lightnin’ Hopkins perform at a college concert (he was the first blues singer I ever saw, and I can tell you—he was *awesome*). The way that we had been introduced to the music, the blues was dead almost by definition because we had encountered it only on records—we never heard it on the radio; it wasn’t presented, like rock & roll, say, at shows. It seemed somehow as if it was something that had been tucked safely away in the past (even if in many cases it was the very recent past), a subject for historical study, however passionate that study might be.

The light only dawned for me with the coming of soul music (Otis Redding, Solomon Burke, Joe Tex), first on the radio, then with the first soul revue I ever saw, the 1964 Hot Summer Shower of Stars, with Solomon as the headliner and both Joe and Otis (and many, many others) on the bill. It has long been my firmest belief that in order to write—fiction, nonfiction, it doesn’t matter—you need to make the empathetic leap. But, really, in order to *live* you have to make that same leap, whether or not in certain harsh literary and political circles “empathy” has become a dirty word. Well, I can tell you, I made that jump as if I were getting ready for the Empathy Olympics, without either hesitation or fear. From that soul revue on, I attended every show that came to town. After being offered the opportunity, I even started to usher the shows, a formidable challenge for an excruciatingly self-conscious twenty-year-old. But the music allowed me to overcome my inhibitions, or at least ignore them for as long as the moment lasted. And the music in almost every case sprang directly from the living tradition of the blues—and of course, the church, from which the blues ultimately sprang. “There is no music like that music,” Baldwin also wrote, “no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing . . . [nothing] to equal the fire and excitement that sometimes, without warning, fill a church, causing the church, as Leadbelly and so many others have testified, to ‘rock.’”

Which leads more or less directly to Blind Willie McTell’s fellow Georgian James Brown, hailing, as he frequently declared, from “Augusta, GA.” (As McTell told John Lomax, “I was born at Thomson, Georgia, 134 miles from Atlanta and 37 miles west of Augusta.”) I don’t think I have to tell any present-day aficionado with the slightest acquaintance with YouTube how cataclysmic it was to see the James Brown Show in 1965. But back then, in a prehistoric world in which James Brown and Howlin’ Wolf and Big Joe Turner were barred not just from

mainstream acceptance but from mainstream notice, I really did feel compelled to tell the world. That’s why I first started writing about music: to proclaim to the world how *great* that music was. I think the first story I ever wrote for print was about James Brown, and it was intended solely to draw people to something that for me was the most electrifying theatrical event I had ever witnessed—and remains so. In an age of Happenings—legitimate theater was increasingly intended at that time to be eruptive and spontaneous—there was nothing that could hold a candle to the theatrics that exploded every time James Brown set foot onstage. The ferocity of his energy, the uncompromising commitment he gave to every show, the hypnotic quality of his incantatory performance, the ongoing drama of death and resurrection that he enacted night after night, *every* night, onstage—well, everyone has their own memories to fall back on, whether of James Brown, or of some other equally electrifying performer. (I mean, come on, I can’t imagine anyone *that* electrifying!) But the point is, none of that pushed out—I’m sure James Brown would have been the first to insist: it all *built* on—Blind Willie McTell. And Louis Jordan. And Sister Rosetta Tharpe. On a tradition that whether or not it is likely to be explicitly acknowledged, or even recognized, by contemporary artists or audiences, remains the underpinning for so much of the music that continues to provide us with inspiration today.

Sometimes I think about what might have happened if Blind Willie McTell had lived for just a few more years. He died just short of the 1960s blues revival in which long-forgotten, or never-known, artists like Son House, Skip James, Sleepy John Estes, and Mississippi John Hurt were rediscovered and celebrated—and contemporary performers like Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf found entirely new careers. Think of what Blind Willie McTell might have made of that kind of opportunity. With his wit, charm, insouciance, and native capacity for adaptation, one could imagine him as a rediscovered superstar, the James Brown of the country blues movement. But in a sense that’s a misreading not just of the blues but of the entire span and tradition of American vernacular music, from Charley Patton to Bill Monroe, from Hank Williams to Chuck Berry, from Mahalia Jackson to Elvis Presley.

The blues, as Blind Willie McTell attempted in his own way to explain in that vexed interview with John Lomax, is above all a tradition in which generation after generation has par-

ticipated. It is a homemade music not all that different from the music of James Brown that calls up all sorts of common memories and was bred on the call-and-response pattern (originating in both the church and the cotton field) in which the audience's response is nearly as important as the singer's call. Above all, it has always been a music centered around the human voice, made on whatever instruments are available, taking whatever situations and conditions are at hand and transforming them by sheer force of imaginative will, seeking not to deny those conditions but to transcend them by celebrating the diversity, the creativity, the spontaneity and indomitability of a culture that simply refused to allow itself to be defined by its oppressors. As James Brown proclaimed, "I'm black and I'm proud." Which, racial specificity aside, was in a very real sense the whole thrust of rock & roll, too, the music that for the first time fused the traditions of everyone, black and white, who had ever been denied a place at the table. Think of Carl Perkins, in the midst of the genial nursery-rhyme versification of "Blue Suede Shoes," coming back again and again with the same message of good-humored pride and defiance: Whatever you do, don't you step on my blue suede shoes. Or as Merle Haggard would declare, in a somewhat different context but with no less personal or poetic conviction, "I Take a Lot of Pride in What I Am."


More and more, we are a culture of lists. There's always got to be a No. 1. There always has to be a "Best." I remember a few years ago—well, it's fifteen years ago now—at the time of the much-vaunted millennium, I got all kinds of calls from mainstream magazines and periodicals (yes, they still existed then) who wanted to know about Elvis mostly, because of my recent biography. Was he the entertainer of the century? Or maybe even of the millennium?

Well, I don't know. I suppose I could have said, No, it was James Brown. Or Blind Willie McTell. Or Merle Haggard. Or Solomon Burke. But that would have been falling into the same trap. The point that I made to each and every one of them—and perhaps it should come as no great surprise that it was not quoted by a single one—was that Elvis alone wasn't the point. That if Elvis, a blues-influenced musician if ever there was one, had achieved anything, if there was one thing of which he was unquestionably proud, it was that he contributed to a cultural revolution as significant as anything that we have witnessed in our time, a cultural revolution in which blues (and bluegrass, and gospel, and country music, and jazz, and soul)

was very much in the forefront. Because looking back on it, the twentieth century clearly saw the triumph of American vernacular music—a near-global recognition that here was America's greatest cultural contribution to the world, with the blues serving as both an underpinning and a common language that at its best continues to represent the polyglot nature of true democracy.

And Blind Willie McTell? Despite everything I've said, and all the facts that I've learned, I've got to admit I still expect him to turn up—in one

of his many guises, under one of his innumerable pseudonyms. And, you know, the funny thing is, in his own way he does. Every time we hear his voice, every time we encounter the persistence of his music, the truth of his vision, the triumph of his hard-won art, it announces over and over again, in its own way, the casual beauty of the illimitable. That's what Blind Willie McTell, or Blind Samuel, or Pig 'n Whistle Red, or Georgia Bill still has to offer. Who's to say that one or another of them won't show up on our doorstep tomorrow? 🐾



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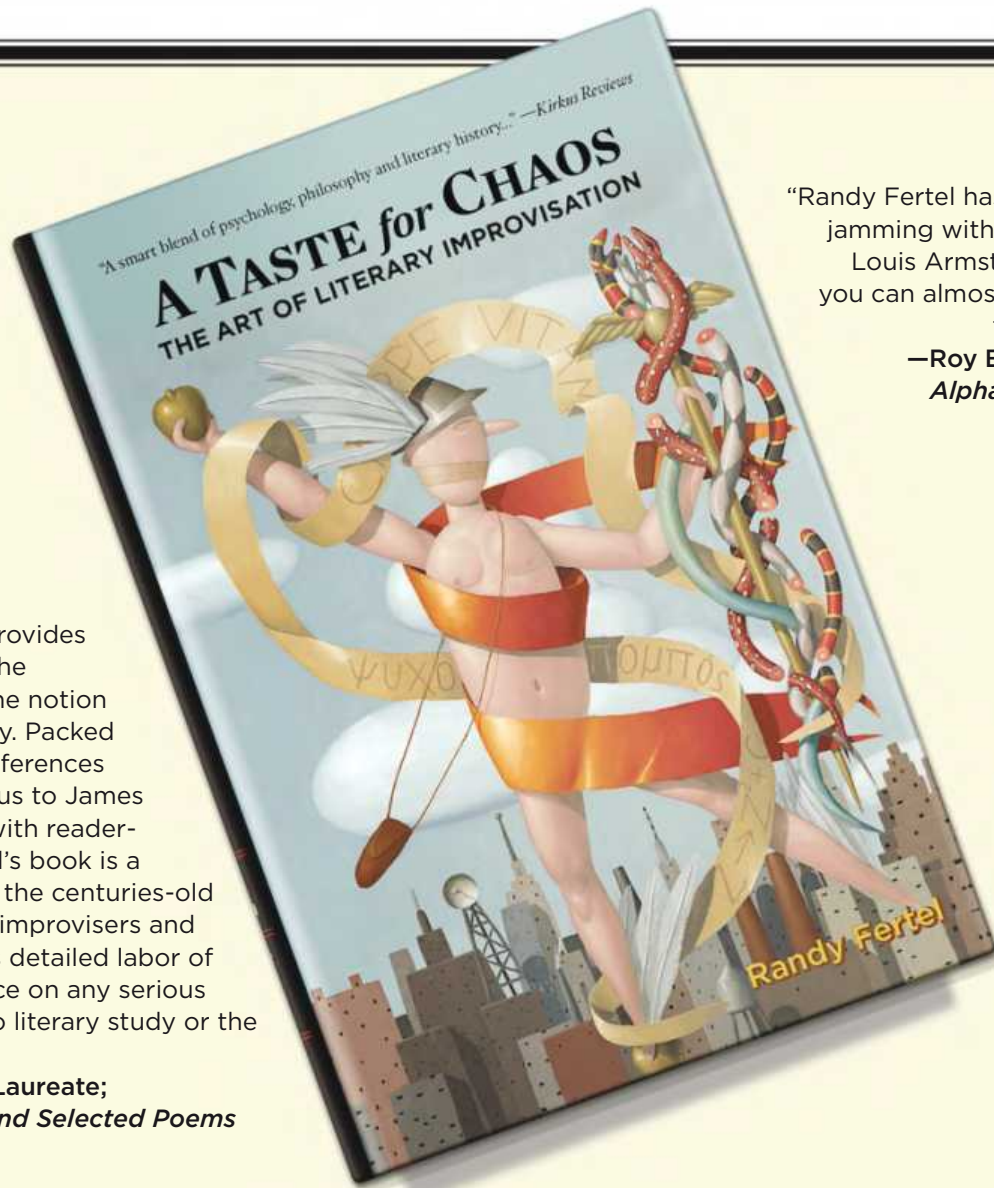
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# That Old Black Magic

BY  
JOHN LINGAN

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Supposedly, in a moment of frustration in the early 1950s, Sam Phillips told his business partner, “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.” Only a few years later, Phillips would record Elvis Presley and more or less prove the point. But for all the savvy of his label boss, the King wasn’t the first white boy to bring a firsthand love of black culture to the American musical mainstream. A generation earlier, another Southerner—this one entirely un-Presley-like in his sound and upbringing—drew from the same tradition and made, if not quite a billion dollars, certainly an inexhaustible fortune, and left behind a half-dozen of America’s most indelible melodies besides.

Johnny Mercer arrived in New York in 1928, at the height of Tin Pan Alley. George Gershwin had premiered “Rhapsody in Blue” four years prior, and Cole Porter was at work on what would become his first hit musical, *Paris*. The Roaring Twenties were American music’s debutante ball, the historical moment when urbane sophisticates wed jazz idioms and orchestral ambition. Before, the young nation boasted only regional music: minstrelsy, Dixieland, cowboy tunes, shape note. Now it had the Great American Songbook.

Mercer was eighteen at the time and had listened to songs by Gershwin, Porter, Irving Berlin, and their New York colleagues for years during his rollicking yet privileged adolescence in Savannah. But coming from a moneyed Georgia family, with ancestors who fought in both the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, his musical background included more than just their pop hits. In an unpublished memoir—written in 1973, three years before his death—Mercer begins his life story with a description of the commute to his family’s summer home in the country: “The roads were still unpaved, made of crushed oyster shell, and as they wound



their way under the trees covered with Spanish moss, it was a sweet, indolent background for a boy to grow up in.” Even more than the rural Georgia scenery, he recalls “the help,” who lived in nearby houses on the property and came over regularly to do their own domestic upkeep—laundry, cooking, bathing—in addition to serving the Mercers:

Having all those colored people around meant having a lot of music also, and not only did we get the traditional lullabies and work songs, but we’d get to hear their church services upon an occasional Sunday. As a matter of fact, I can hardly ever remember there not being music, in town or out. My Aunt Hattie swears I hummed back at her at the tender age of 6 months, and she always used to take me to see the minstrel

shows which were so popular then in the South as well as the big Northern cities.

At the country property, on the banks of the Vernon River—a landscape that inspired “Moon River,” for which Mercer would later win the third of his four “best original song” Oscars, in 1961—he heard these same black families speak Geechee, the Carolina dialect that Gershwin appropriated for *Porgy and Bess*. But Mercer’s cross-cultural education was fostered in the city as well. His father, a banker who lost his fortune right as Johnny set out for Manhattan, sang along to his sizable collection of race records at home. As soon as Johnny was old enough, he did his own record shopping, showing a particular appetite for Louis Armstrong. With his parents and brother, he was a regular attendee of the famed Savannah Easter parade, a vibrant showcase of black dance, music,



and fashion. His black nurse sang him spirituals in between lullabies. (Decades later, Mercer would pay to repair the roof of her church.) As a boy, he took regular walks through town, peeking in the city's black churches, grabbing a seat if a pew was open. His regular stops included the United House of Prayer for All People, where he heard the controversial Charles Manuel "Sweet Daddy" Grace preach during the faith healer's regular trips to town.

"George Gershwin could go up to Harlem to hear jazz and blues," wrote biographer Philip Furia, but "Johnny Mercer, alone among the great songwriters of his generation, was, from the day he was born, influenced by the music of blacks."

Relative to Elvis, Mercer's most famous songs bore little of that influence on the surface. He wrote the lyrics for an unbelievable run of hits in the late 1930s and '40s, often recording his own popular versions as a vocalist: "Come Rain or Come Shine," "You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby," "I'm Old Fashioned," "Too Marvelous for Words," "One for My Baby (And One More for the Road)," "Laura," "Fools Rush In." But his very first commercial success, a lesser-known 1933 Hoagy Carmichael collaboration called "Lazybones," which was a hit for Mildred Bailey (and later Louis Armstrong himself), was a direct homage to the voices he'd heard as a boy:

*Long as there is chicken gravy on your rice,  
Everything is nice.  
Long as there's a watermelon on your vine,  
Everything is fine . . .*

*Lazybones, sleepin' in the shade,  
How you 'spec' to get your cornmeal made?  
Never get your cornmeal made,  
Sleepin' in the evenin' shade.*

"Lazybones," recorded the same year that Gershwin's *Geechee* opera premiered, depicts "taters" in the ground, the hot noon sun, and a fishing line hanging in the water—a Southern pastoral so Edenic that it's nearly pastiche. It's also, despite black artists' embrace of the song, a borderline-racist depiction of Southern blackness, a cousin of Disney's *Song of the South*, from the next decade. But "Lazybones" is of a piece with Mercer's better-known, more universal compositions, which, while always clever, were never more complicated than they needed to be. His melodies don't leap and dash—they glide along conversationally, as if he made them up on the spot. Lyrically, he never used two syllables when one would do, and he returned to Southern nature

scenes over and over again, letting his images quietly speak for themselves. In "Skylark," one of his most-recorded songs, he asks the title bird,

*Have you seen a valley green with spring,  
Where my heart can go a-journeying?  
Over the shadows and the rain,  
To a blossom-covered lane.*

And in my favorite of his songs, the 1939 Jimmy Van Heusen tune "I Thought About You," he finds uncommon emotional complexity in an uneventful nighttime ride:

*I took a trip on a train  
And I thought about you.  
I passed a shadowy lane  
And I thought about you.*

*Two or three cars parked under the stars,  
Winding stream.  
Moon shining down on some little town,  
And with each beam, the same old dream.*

Is the singer sad or happy, regretful or horny? He claims to feel blue, but that's as much as we're told about his internal state. Instead, we're presented with one fleeting, unpeopled scene after another, all described with an absolute minimum of words and only the slightest up-and-down incremental melody. When Yip Harburg, the celebrated lyricist and Mercer mentor, described his protégé as "one of our great folk poets," this was the kind of song he surely had in mind.

Beyond his lyrics' rural and black affectations—the dropped g's, the cornpone scenery—Mercer brought a distinctly Southern stillness to American pop. Economical yet vivid in his natural descriptions, he kept his songs' emotions at a cool simmer and rarely told stories, instead opting for calm, wistful dioramas like the one he arranges in "Early Autumn":

*When an early autumn walks the land and  
chills the breeze  
And touches with her hand the summer trees,  
Perhaps you'll understand what memories  
I own.  
There's a dance pavilion in the rain all shut-  
tered down,  
A winding country lane all russet brown,  
A frosty windowpane shows me a town grown  
lonely.*

Mercer wrote nearly 1,500 songs, so maybe it's unfair to point out that three of the four

I've quoted so far include mention of a "lane," an easy (and easily rhymeable) symbol for escapist romance. But I wouldn't be the first to acknowledge his complacent streak; prolific as he was, Mercer garnered a reputation as a bit of a lazybones himself.

He preferred to write lyrics while supine, eyes closed, "as if he could dream songs into existence," according to the critic Wilfrid Sheed. His entire public persona was built around this same aloofness; onstage (a rare occurrence, though he became better known for live performances in the 1970s), his mind seemed to be elsewhere, and even his Tinseltown reminiscences seem muted, obligatory. While Mercer worked consistently for decades, for every great pop composer of the era, he was strongest on the scale of individual songs. No major Broadway success, no film soundtrack, no grand artistic statement ever sprung from those naps with the muse. His tower of song was built verse by casual verse.

His singing voice, too—like that of another Southern-bred, Hollywood-friendly master of concision, Randy Newman, who resembles Mercer more than any songwriter since at least the Brill Building era—could blur the line between "relaxed" and "soporific." He made his friend and early creative partner Bing Crosby sound over-caffeinated.

But he roiled inside. When he drank, which he did often, he got blackout hammered and became infamously abusive. He spewed insults at good friends, dumped cocktails on his wife's head, urinated in a hostess's shoes, and once tried to force himself on his own niece. In the mornings he was always contrite, sending remorseful notes of apology, and most recollections of Mercer are besotted, not angry. In Savannah now, he is remembered as a classic Southern gentleman, an inspiration for museums, historical walks, and John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. You'd think he owned the place. But in fact, he tended to keep the town at arm's length, as he did most things.

Asked by the state legislature to compose a new official Georgia song, he came up with a rare seven-verse epic that slathers on the good-ole-summertime hokum and never reveals anything meaningful about his attachment to the place:

*Georgia, Georgia, where do I start?  
Words can sing but not like the heart;  
There's no land in all this earth,  
Like the land of my birth.*

*Georgia, Georgia, careless yield  
Watermelons ripe in the field;*

*Pine trees full of red-bird song,  
River rollin' along.*

*Georgia nights when twilight is done,  
Smell of peaches long in the sun,  
Breeze comes blowin' through the shade  
Like a cool lemonade.*

The song, according to his memoir, was ultimately rejected for being “too Savannah” to reflect the whole state, but that might grant it too much credit. Rare for Mercer, he lifted a few lines from another source, in this case Stephen Vincent Benét’s “John Brown’s Body,” though he borrowed none of Benét’s galloping intensity. Instead, this ode to Georgia is positively generic, proof that Mercer’s genius was for sly gesture and restrained emotion, not heart-swelling pride and love, and certainly not for unabashed sentimentalism.

Perhaps this is Johnny Mercer’s true legacy—he not only smuggled a genuine Southern musical sensibility into the Great American Songbook, he brought along the whole breadth of regional contradictions that have historically fed so much of the South’s art and angst. He was both a manor-born gentleman and a venomous alcoholic; a prolific natural talent and, according to many who knew him, a bafflingly unambitious artist; he had black music and speech in his marrow, yet never had a close black friend. He may have been the first writer to bring Southern identity to American pop, yet one of his most famous songs claimed, “Any Place I Hang My Hat Is Home.”

Like any pioneer, Mercer bridged worlds as a matter of course. He made the exotic seem natural and welcome, and never more so than in “That Old Black Magic,” written in 1941 and inspired by Cole Porter’s line, “Do do that voodoo that you do so well,” from “You Do Something to Me.” Mercer transformed the idea from mere wordplay to a whole motif, envisioning black magic as a welcome sensual trance:

*That old black magic has me in its spell,  
That old black magic that you weave so well.  
Icy fingers up and down my spine,  
The same old witchcraft when your eyes meet  
mine.*

*The same old tingle that I feel inside  
When that elevator starts its ride.  
Down and down I go, 'round and 'round I go,  
Like a leaf that's caught in the tide.*

Mercer’s words conjured new voices, new vistas, but they always seem to beckon: don’t fear. No big words here, no artsy posturing. Even witchcraft is as natural as the water and the leaves. I may drink too much, but I’ll always apologize. Come on in. 🍷

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# Upbringing

BY  
WILLIAM WRIGHT

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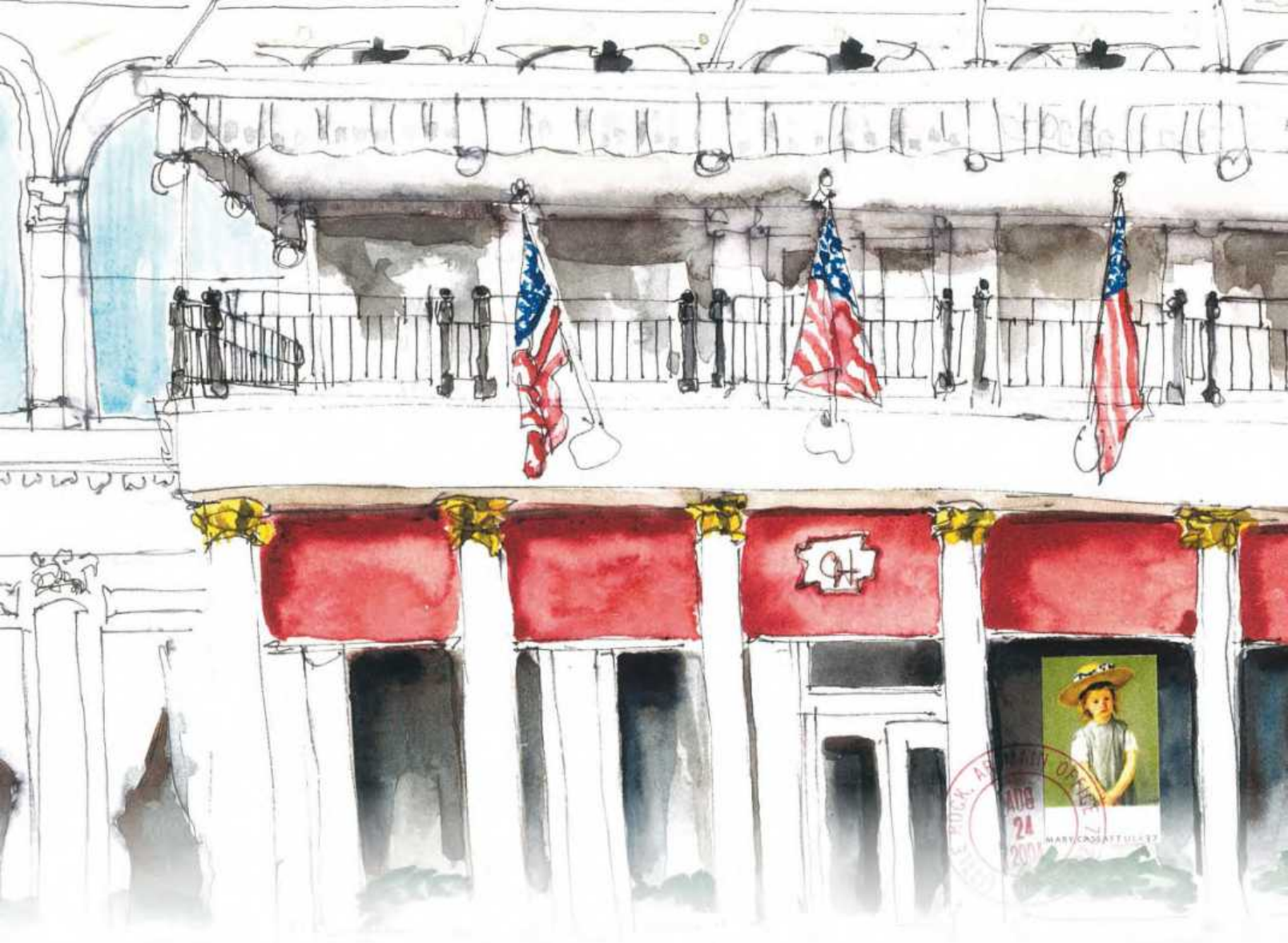
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So shout *ballelujab!* as they douse the boy in river water.  
So bring him up to find his eyes laced in silt—  
so the congregants scowl at him, the odd one—  
so red the mud smeared in his hair it looks as blood gone slag with sin,  
he runs home in rain, his teeth chattering,

so the wind bites at him cold, even in May, the backroad mess  
so bog-sloaked and rock-slashed—and home now  
so the family scatters each self to a nest,  
so delicately built with least resentments—and the boy,  
so tired, his ears crammed with biblical slosh, sleeps  
so soundly, dreams of a girl he will never witness, her hair

struck red against the wetness of her lavender dress,  
so lovely, lovely, that when he wakes he’ll walk the farm  
so pocked with nails and crates and lichen-licked marl and think never  
so much as now of the clay that makes him, the water that shapes him  
so heavily, this land a trap, a friend.





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# Nomad, Indian, Saint

BY  
JAMIE QUATRO

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1. She is nineteen, a sophomore at a university north of Los Angeles, taking a seminar on the British Romantic poets. The campus is perched on a cliff above the Pacific; she never tires of watching the gradations of blue and green and slate and—in the evenings—the colorless scintillations of sunset. Some weekends she drives south on Pacific Coast Highway till it curls into the Santa Monica tunnel; other weekends, north to Westward and Zuma beaches, sometimes all the way to County Line. Catalina Island visible on clear days, beyond that the ocean stretching to—where? Japan? She pictures her little car on the map, hugging the edge of the continent, water and cliff and sky all angles, vast and intimidating. She is insignificant in the universe, God a sublime, untouchable peak. On the stereo is a song by her new favorite band, the Indigo Girls: *Georgia nights softer than a whisper, peach trees stitched across the land, farmland like a tapestry*. She has never been to the South but the song paints it for her, softness and green curves. An intimate

landscape. She feels nostalgic for a place she's never seen, *smoke from the chimneys meets its maker in the sky*, God at rest in the tips of trees. Perhaps one might live there someday, make a home and raise children in Georgia's hushed shade. Perhaps, too, this is what Shelley means by the difference between the beautiful and the sublime. She lives in the sublime, longs for the beautiful.

2. She is twenty-four, a doctoral student at Princeton, working on Wordsworth. Her favorite poet. She writes a long essay on *The Ruined Cottage* but it's the *Immortality Ode* she keeps coming back to. Where does it go, all that magic from childhood? The fallings from us, the vanishings? Woolf's moments of being, Joyce's epiphanies, Wordsworth's spots of time, yes, she thinks, yes—how they break in on us, unbidden; how they carry us back to the past, remind us of the connection we had to divinity, once. How apt the turn in the Ode: thanks be for those shadowy recollections, fountain light of all our day, with the power to make our noisy years seem moments in the being of the eternal Silence. Thanks to the years that bring the philosophic mind and on her headphones, during long runs, it's still the Indigo Girls: *This world falls on me, hopes of immortality, everywhere I turn, all the beauty just keeps shaking me. This world was meant for me*. The Indigo Girls, she thinks, would totally get Wordsworth.

3. She is twenty-eight, with three children, ages three and two and six months. She is tired, indolent, has trouble getting out of bed. A neighbor's baby is born with massive spinal

defects and she cannot feel bad for the neighbor, or for the baby. (Why can't she feel *anything*?) Acedia: one of the seven deadly sins, the mood in which the good wishes to play upon us but we have no string to respond. She is reading Merton's *Contemplative Prayer*. He writes of the balance between contemplation and action, Mary and Martha, and she is all Mary and no Martha, trapped in her own head, self-absorbed. Narcissus. Rodin's "Thinker." *Now I know a refuge never grows from a chin in a hand in a thoughtful pose, gotta tend the earth if you want a rose*. Get up, she tells herself, listening to the song. Get your ass out of bed.

4. She is thirty-three and grieving. She has hurt those closest to her but doesn't feel sorry for that, yet. She only misses the thing that caused the pain, the source of addiction. There are counselors, pastors, well-meaning friends, but she can only sit at her desk with her forehead pressed hard into the wood. She doesn't cry, though wishes she could. She mostly just takes deep breaths. She is waiting for clarity, the black-and-white certainty she once had about what is right, and what is wrong, to settle back over her. For the ship of safety to come back and pick her up. It doesn't return. She has sunk it. She goes, finally, to the doctors, takes walks on the mountain. Looks to her children, does the workouts, reads the Bible. But what if she is meant to learn (years later she will know this is the case) to embrace gray? What if God lives in the questions and not the answers; in the great ugly struggle itself, not in the finish, the win or loss? Perhaps she will live the same story, over and over, for the rest of her life. Perhaps it is the very struggle that will take her closer, and closer, to fine. 🍷





SHAN



(A PREQUEL)

BY KIESE LAYMON



**F**rom six in the morning until five in the afternoon, five days a week, for thirty years, my Grandmama Catherine's fingers, palms, and wrists wandered deep in the bellies of dead chickens. Grandmama was a buttonhole slicer at a chicken plant in central

Mississippi—her job was to slice the belly and pull out the guts of thousands of chickens a day. Grandmama got up every morning around 4:30 A.M. She took her bath, then prepared grits, smoked sausage, and pear preserves for us. After breakfast, Grandmama made me take a teaspoon of cod liver oil “for my vitamins,” then she coated the area between her breasts in powder before putting on the clothes she had ironed the night before. I was ten, staying with Grandmama for the summer, and I remember marveling at her preparations and wondering why she got so fresh, so clean, just to leave the house and get dirty.

“There’s layers to this,” Grandmama often said, when describing her job to folks. She went into that plant every day, knowing it was a laboratory for racial and gendered terror. Still, she wanted to be the best at what she did—and not just the best buttonhole slicer in the plant, but the best, most stylized, most efficient worker in Mississippi. She understood that the audience for her work was not just her coworkers or her white male shift managers, but all the Southern black women workers who preceded her and, most importantly, all the Southern black women workers coming next.

By the end of the day, when the two-tone blue Impala crept back into the driveway on the side of our shotgun house, I’d run out to welcome Grandmama home. “Hey baby,” she’d say. “Let me wash this stank off my hands before I hug your neck.”

*This stank* wasn’t *that stink*. This stank was root and residue of black Southern poverty, and devalued black Southern labor, black Southern excellence, black Southern imagination, and black Southern woman magic. This was the stank from whence black Southern life, love, and labor came.

Even at ten years old, I understood that the presence and

necessity of this stank dictated how Grandmama moved on Sundays. As the head of the usher board at Concord Baptist, she sometimes wore the all-white polyester uniform that all the other church ushers wore. On those Sundays, Grandmama was committed to out-freshing the other ushers by draping colorful pearls and fake gold around her neck, or stunting with some shiny shoes she’d gotten from my Aunt Linda in Vegas. And Grandmama’s outfits, when she wasn’t wearing the stale usher board uniform, always had to be fresher this week than the week before.

She was committed to out-freshing herself, which meant that she was up late on Saturday nights, working like a wizard, taking pieces of this blouse from 1984 and sewing them into these dresses from 1969. Grandmama’s primary audience on Sundays, her church sisters, looked with awe and envy at her outfits, inferring she had a fashion industry hook-up from Atlanta, or a few secret revenue streams. Not so. This was just how Grandmama brought the stank of her work life into her spiritual communal life, in a way that I loved and laughed at as a kid.

I didn’t fully understand or feel inspired by Grandmama’s stank or freshness until years later, when I heard the albums *ATLiens* and *Aquemini* from those Georgia-based artists called OutKast.

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**O**ne day near the beginning of my junior year in college, 1996, I walked out of my dorm room in Oberlin, Ohio, heading to the gym, when I heard a new sound and a familiar voice blasting from the room of my friend John Norris, a Southern black boy from Clarksville, Tennessee.

*We don’t contribute to your clandestine activity.*

*My soliloquy may be hard for some to swallow*

*But so is cod liver oil.*

*You went behind my back like Bluto when he cut up Olive Oyl.*

*Two things I hate: liars and thieves, they make my blood boil.*

*Boa constricted, on my soul that they coil.*

I went into John’s room, wondering who was rapping about cod liver oil over reverbed bass, and asked him, “What the fuck is that?” It was “Wheelz of Steel,” from *ATLiens*. Norris handed me the CD. The illustrated cover looked like a comic book, its heroes standing back-to-back in front of a mysterious four-armed force: Big Boi in a letterman’s jacket with a Braves hat cocked to the right, and André in a green turban like something I’d only seen my Grandmama and Mama Lara rock. Big Boi’s fingers were clenched, ready to fight. André’s were spread, ready to conjure.

John and I listened to the record twice before I borrowed my friend’s green Geo, drove to Elyria, and bought *ATLiens* for myself. Like *Soul Food* by Atlanta’s Goodie Mob, another

album I was wearing out at the time—their song “Thought Process,” which featured André, had nudged me through the sadness of missing Mississippi a year earlier—*ATLiens* was unafraid of the revelatory dimensions of black Southern life. Like *Soul Food*, *ATLiens* explored the inevitability of death and the possibility of new life, new movement, and new mojo.

But something was different.

I already knew OutKast; I loved their first album, *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*, in part because of the clever way they interpolated funk and soul into rap. *ATLiens*, however, sounded unlike anything I’d ever heard or imagined. The vocal tones were familiar, but the rhyme patterns, the composition, the production were equal parts red clay, thick buttery grits, and Mars. Nothing sounded like *ATLiens*. The album instantly changed not just my expectations of music, but my expectations of myself as a young black Southern artist.

By then, I already knew I was going to be a writer. I had no idea if I would eat off of what I wrote, but I knew I had to write to be a decent human being. I used ink and the page to probe and to remember through essays and sometimes through satire. I was imitating, and maybe interrogating, but I’m not sure that I had any idea of how to use words to imagine and really innovate. All my English teachers talked about the importance of finding “your voice.” It always confused me because I knew we all had so many voices, so many audiences, and my teachers seemed only to really want the kind of voice that sat with its legs crossed, reading the *New York Times*. I didn’t have to work to find that cross-legged voice—it was the one education necessitated I lead with.

What my English teachers didn’t say was that literary voices aren’t discovered fully formed. They aren’t natural or organic. Literary voices are built and shaped—and not just by words, punctuation, and sentences, but by the author’s intended audience and a composition’s form. It was only after listening to *ATLiens*, discovering Toni Cade Bambara’s Southern Collective of African-American Writers, and reading the work of my Mama’s former student, the hip-hop journalist Charlie Braxton, that I realized in order to get where I needed to go as a human being and an artist, in order to release my own spacey stank blues, I had to write fiction. Toni Cade, Charlie, Dre, and Big showed me it was possible to create and hear imaginary worlds wholly fertilized with “maybe,” “if,” and “probably.”

I remember sitting in my dorm room under my huge Black Lightning poster, next to my tiny picture of Grandmama. I was supposed to be doing a paper on “The Cask of Amontillado,” but I was thinking about OutKast’s “Wailin’.” The song made me know that there was something to be gained, felt, and used in imitating sounds from whence we came, particularly in the minimal hook: the repeated moan of one about to wail. I’d heard that moan in the presence of older Southern black folk my entire life, but I’d never heard it connecting two rhymed verses. Art couldn’t get any fresher than that.

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By the mid-nineties, hip-hop was an established art form, foregrounding a wide, historically neglected audience in completely new ways. Never had songs had so many words. Never had songs lacked melodies. Never had songs pushed against the notion of a hook repeated every forty-five seconds. Like a lot of Southern black boys, I loved New York hip-hop, although I didn’t feel loved or imagined by most of it.

When André said, “The South got something to say and that’s all I got to say,” at the Source Awards in 1995, I heard him saying that we were no longer going to artistically follow New York. Not because the artists of New York were wack, but because disregarding our particular stank in favor of a stink that didn’t love or respect us was like taking a broken elevator down into artistic and spiritual death.

With OutKast, Dre and Big each carved out their own individual space, and along with sonic contrast—Big lyrically fought and André lyrically conjured—they gave us philosophical contrast. When Dre raps, “No drugs or alcohol so I can get the signal clear as day,” I remember folks suggesting there was a smidgen of shade being thrown on Big Boi, who on the same album rhymed, “I got an ounce of dank and a couple of dranks, so let’s crank up this session.” If there was ever shade between them back then, I got the sense, they’d handle it like we Southern black boys did: they’d wrasse it out, talk more shit, hug, and come back ready to out-fresh each other, along with every artist who’d come before them in the making of lyrical art.

OutKast created a different kind of stank, too: an urban Southern stank so familiar with and indebted to the gospel, blues, jazz, rock, and funk born in the rural black South. And while they were lyrically competing against each other on track after track, together Big and Dre were united, railing and wailing against New York and standing up to a post-civil rights South chiding young Southern black boys to pull up our pants and fight white supremacy with swords of respectability and narrow conceptions of excellence. *ATLiens* made me love being black, Southern, celibate, sexy, awkward, free of drugs and alcohol, Grandmama’s grandbaby, and cooler than a polar bear’s toenails.

Right out of Oberlin, I earned a fellowship in the MFA program at Indiana University, to study fiction. For the first time in my life, I was thinking critically about narrative construction in everything from malt liquor commercials to the Bible. It was around that time that Lauryn Hill gave my generation an elixir to calm, compete with, and call out a culture insistent on coming up with new ways to devalue black women. In *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, I saw myself as the intimate partner doing wrong by Lauryn, and she made me consider how for all the differences between André and Big Boi, they shared in the same kind of misogynoir on their first two albums. (Particularly on the song “Jazzy Belle”: “Even Bo knew, that you got poked / like acupuncture patients while our nation is a boat / Straight



sinkin', I hate thinkin' that these the future mommas of our children.") *Miseducation* had me expecting a lot more from my male heroes. A month later, OutKast dropped *Aquemini*.

Deep into the album, the song "West Savannah" ends with a skit. We hear a young black boy trying to impress his friend by calling a young black girl on the phone, three-way. When the girl answers, we hear a mama, an auntie, or a grandmama tell her to "get your ass in here." The girl tells the boy she has to go—and then the boy tells her that his friend wants some sex. The girl emphatically lets the boy know there is no way she's having sex with him, before hanging up in his face. This is where the next song, "Da Art of Storytelling" (Pt. 1)," begins.

In the first verse, Big rhymes about a sexual experience with a girl named Suzy Screw, during which he exchanges a CD and a poster for oral sex. In the second, André raps about Suzy's friend Sasha Thumper. As André's verse proceeds, he and Sasha are lying on their backs "staring at stars above, talking about what we gone be when we grow up." When Dre asks Sasha what she wants to be, Sasha Thumper responds, "Alive." The song ends with the news that Sasha Thumper has overdosed after partnering with a man who treats her wrong. Here was "another black experience," as Dre would say to end another verse on the album.

Hip-hop has always embraced metafiction. In the next track—"Da Art of Storytelling" (Pt. 2)—Big and Dre deliver a pair of verses about the last recording they'll ever create due to an environmental apocalypse. We've long had emcees rhyming about the potency of their own rhymes. But I have never heard a song attribute the end of the world to a rhyme. In the middle of Dre's verse, he nudges us to understand that there's something more happening in this song: "Hope I'm not over your head but if so you will catch on later."

Big Boi alludes to the Book of Revelation, mentions some ballers trying to unsuccessfully repent and make it to heaven, and then rhymes about getting his family and heading to the Dungeon, their basement studio in Atlanta—the listener can easily imagine it as a bunker—where he'll record one last song. The world is ending. He grabs the mic: "I got in the booth to run the final portion / The beat was very dirty and the vocals had distortion!" Of course, this ending describes the very track we're hearing, thus bringing the fictional apocalypse of the song into our real world.

I was reading Octavia Butler's *Kindred* at the time *Aquemini* came out. Steeped in all that stank, I conceived of a book within a book within a book, written by a young Southern black girl whose parents disappear. "I'm a round runaway character," was the first sentence my narrator wrote. I decided that she would be an emcee, but I didn't know her name. I knew that she would tell the world that she was an ellipsis, a runaway ellipsis willing to do any and all things to stop her black Southern community from being written off the face of the earth. I scribbled these notes on the blank pages of *Kindred* while *Aquemini* kept play-

ing in the background. By the time the song "Liberation" was done, *Long Division*, my first novel, was born.

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I thought about interviewing André and Big Boi for this piece. I was going to get them to spend the night at this huge house I'm staying in this year as the Writer in Residence at the University of Mississippi. I planned on inviting Grandmama, too. Between the four of us, I thought we could get to the bottom of some necessary stank, and maybe play a game of "Who's Fresher: Georgia vs. Mississippi." But the interviews fell through, and Grandmama refused to come up to Oxford because I'm the only black person she knows here, and she tends to avoid places where she doesn't know many black folks.

I kept imagining the meeting, though, and I thought a lot about what in the world I would say to Big Boi and André. As dope as they are, there's nothing I want to ask them about their art. I experienced it, and I'm thankful they extended the traditions and frequencies from whence we came. Honestly, the only thing I'd want to ask them would be about their Grandmamas. I'd want to know if their Grandmamas thought they were beautiful. I'd want to know how their Grandmamas wanted to be loved. I'd want to know how good they were at loving their Grandmamas on days when the world wasn't so kind.

The day that my Grandmama came home after work without the stank of chicken guts, powder, perfume, sweat, and Coke-Cola, I knew that her time at the plant was done. On that day—when her body wouldn't let her work anymore—I knew I'd spend the rest of my life trying to honor her and make a way for her to be as fresh and remembered as she wants to be.

Due to diabetes, Grandmama moves mostly in a wheelchair these days, but she's still the freshest person in my world. Visually, I'm not so fresh. I wear the same thing every day. But I am a Southern black worker, committed to building stank-ass art rooted in honesty, will, and imagination.

This weekend, I'm going to drive down to Grandmama's house in central Mississippi. I'm going to bring my computer. I'm going to ask her to sit next to me while I finish this essay about her artistic rituals of labor vis-à-vis OutKast. I'm going to play *ATLiens* and *Aquemini* on her couch while finishing the piece, and think of every conceivable way to thank her for her stank, and for her freshness. I'm going to tell Grandmama that because of her, I know what it's like to be loved responsibly. I'm going to tell her that her love helped me listen, remember, and imagine when I never wanted to listen, remember, or imagine again. I'm going to read the last paragraph of this piece to her, and when Grandmama hugs my neck, I'm going to tell her that when no one in the world believed I was a beautiful Southern black boy, she believed. I'm going to tell Grandmama that her belief is the only reason I'm still alive, that belief in black Southern love is why we work. 🍌

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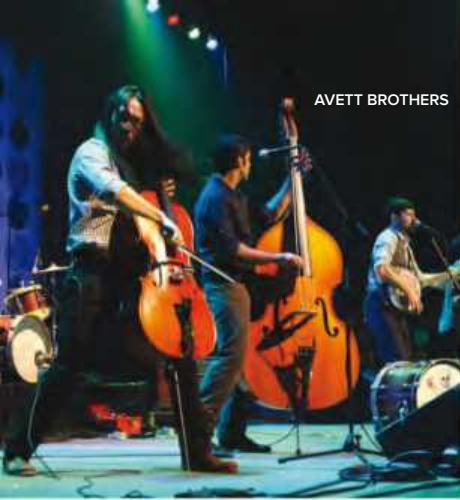
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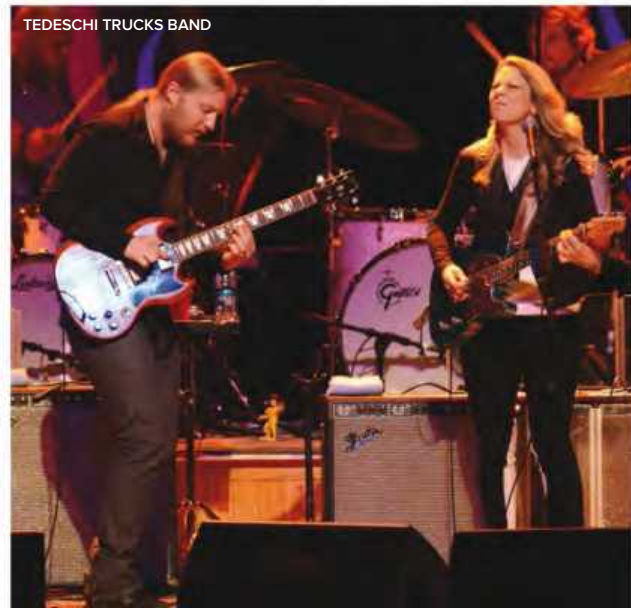
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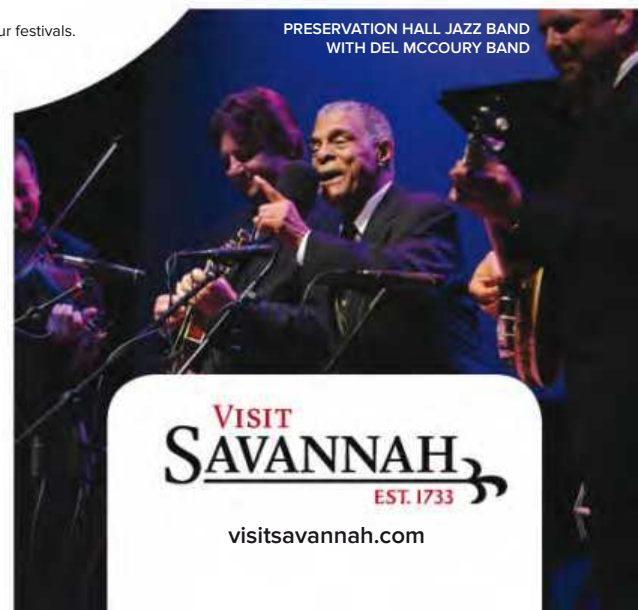
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## Nudie and the Cosmic American

BY  
ELYSSA EAST

The 1960s were coming to a close when rising country rock musician Gram Parsons posed next to Nudie Cohn, the celebrated Western-wear designer more than three times his senior. Raeanne Rubenstein shot their portrait for *Show: The Magazine of the Arts* at Nudie's Los Angeles workshop. Over a smooth bare chest and midriff, the twenty-something Parsons wore the suit Nudie designed for him for the cover of the Flying Burrito Brothers' debut album, *The Gilded Palace of Sin*. Made of white cavalry twill, it was embroidered with crudely rendered naked ladies, rhinestone-studded marijuana leaves, and sequin-dotted poppies. Tuinal and Seconal capsules and sugar cubes laced with LSD decorated the sleeves. On the back shined a

giant, gleaming cross. Flames licked the sides of both bell-bottom legs. Rubenstein's shutter clicked, capturing the near-familial warmth and affection between the two men, neither of whom would have predicted that the suit, which went on to help make Parsons a legend, also foretold of his death.

Nudie, who came to Hollywood in the 1940s and hung his hat as the "Rodeo Tailor," was legendary for creating what we think of today as an iconic American look: flashy Western high style. Born Nuta Kotlyarenko to a Jewish family in Kiev, then part of the Russian Empire, he immigrated to America in 1913, when he was eleven, and a customs agent on Ellis Island renamed him "Nudie Cohn." He went on to dress the preponderance of Hollywood's cowboys—Roy Rogers, Dale Evans, John Wayne—as well as country music's biggest stars, from Hank Williams to Johnny Cash. Nudie's first designs depicted classical Western motifs in rhinestones: cactuses, covered wagons, hearts, and roses. In 1957, he designed Elvis's most famous outfit: the gold lamé suit the King wore on the cover of *50,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong*. (The suit cost Elvis \$10,000, equivalent to \$85,000 today.)

Many consider Parsons's "Nudie suit" to be the designer's masterpiece. Nicknamed "Sin City," after a song on the Burritos' album, the suit has been called "the Sistine Chapel ceiling of cowboy attire" by *Guardian* critic John Robinson. It is a study in dualities: vice and sanctity, irony and earnestness, and country

music style and rock & roll sensibility. Aesthetically, it is the perfect visual expression of Parsons's music, which melded country to rock and gave rise to an entirely new sound. Bands such as the Eagles, the Doobie Brothers, and later-generation artists Uncle Tupelo, Whiskeytown, Old 97's, and Steve Earle—and the entire Americana and alt-country movements—would be inconceivable without the example Parsons set. Contemporary musicians such as Jack White and Jeff Tweedy continue to wear Nudie- and Parsons-inspired looks to this day.

Ingram "Gram" Cecil Connor was born into a family of wealth, thanks to his grandfather's citrus empire. In his native Waycross, Georgia, he often traveled in chauffeured Cadillacs and journeyed to Florida in plush, private train cars. At age nine, Gram saw Elvis Presley open for Little Jimmy Dickens at the Waycross City Auditorium, an experience that changed the budding musician's life. In *Twenty Thousand Roads*, a biography of Parsons, David N. Meyer quotes Gram's nanny, Louise Cone: "Gram was a sweet child as long as you let him be Elvis Presley."

Parsons also knew suffering. Two days before Christmas of 1958, when Gram was twelve, his alcoholic father, Ingram Cecil "Coon Dog" Connor, committed suicide with a bullet to his head. Gram moved to his grandparents' family compound in Winter Haven, Florida, with his mother, Avis, and



little sister. A few months later, Avis married a smooth-talking, slickly dressed man named Robert Parsons, and Gram Connor officially became Gram Parsons.

When he was fifteen, Parsons performed in a band called the Legends—they wore matching red blazers and traveled to gigs in a customized VW bus detailed with the band's name. Parsons, whose family had hired a manager for him, traveled to Greenville, South Carolina, to a solo gig on the *Coca-Cola Hi-Fi Club Hootenanny*, where he met and joined the Carolina-based, Journeymen-inspired Shilos. The band spent the summer after Parsons's junior year in New York City playing the legendary folk clubs Café Wha?, Café Rafio, and the Bitter End. Back in Florida, on the day of Parsons's high school graduation in 1965, his hard-drinking mother died from cirrhosis of the liver.

It was a pivotal year for Parsons, who headed to Harvard, and for American music. That summer, Dylan went electric at the Newport Folk Festival, a move that kicked folk back to the dustbin. Country was readily accessible across the U.S., but as Parsons's eventual bandmate, guitarist John Nuese, told biographer Meyer,

"Nobody was listening to what they'd call redneck country-western shit."

Parsons dropped out of Harvard after one semester, moved to New York City with his musician friends, and formed the International Submarine Band. While he'd had a strong formative exposure to country in Georgia and Florida, it was Nuese who introduced the band to contemporary twang, including the genre's older, more obscure ballads and songs. "We were discovering the depths of how impassioned that music is," said ISB bassist Ian Dunlop. "It's magnetic and terrifically poetic. It's the human condition exposed."

The band spun and studied modern albums by Bakersfield musicians Merle Haggard and Buck Owens, as well as George Jones. Though Parsons didn't know him yet, Nudie had already dressed all three of these men; as his designs matured, he made special stage suits for artists in celebration of their greatest hits. He embellished a black suit with moonshine bottles and lightning bolts for Jones's first No. 1 country single, "White Lightning." For Webb Pierce's hit version of Jimmie Rodgers's "In the Jailhouse Now," Nudie covered the front of a suit with jailhouses and on the back

embroidered a picture of Pierce strumming a guitar behind bars.

By the spring of 1967, the ISB moved to Los Angeles, where things finally began to come together musically for Parsons. In 1968, the ISB cut an album, *Safe at Home*, that had a unique, countrified rock sound informed by the band's deep study of Americana. But before the album was released, Gram left the group to join the most popular band in the country: the Byrds. He lasted only six months. Still, it was long enough for him to lead them to completely change their sound for *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, which Country Music Hall of Fame writer Peter Cooper described as "the gateway drug to country." Cooper also stated, "Gram turned the Byrds from America's most popular rock band to one of America's least popular country bands." Audiences didn't yet know what to make of the marriage of the two genres. Parsons called it "Cosmic American Music."

The divide between rock and country held true in fashion, as well. Pianist David Barry, who was active in the L.A. music scene, said, "People like me wore jeans and boots, which is exactly what real country stars didn't want to wear because it suggested they came from country's poor white roots." The "real" country stars "looked like a Las Vegas joke."

In the late 1960s, Nudie's son-in-law and head tailor Manuel Cuevas met Parsons and enticed him into Nudie's shop. In addition to working for Nudie, Manuel, who goes by his first name professionally, was working on crafting the Grateful Dead's skeleton-and-roses insignia and designing the suits for the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's* album. Soon after, Parsons began sporting Nudie's outlandish creations as the visual corollary to his unique sound. Nudie would hop in his custom Western-themed Cadillac convertible, with pistols for door handles, a hand-tooled leather dashboard covered in silver dollars, horseshoe hood ornaments, and steer horns jutting forth from the front grill, and drive to the clubs to hear the band play. Parsons had started a new band called the Flying Burrito Brothers with Chris Hillman, another ex-Byrd. "Nudie loved seeing Gram up on the stage, sparkling and looking so beautiful in his designs," said photographer Raeanne Rubenstein. When it came time for the Burritos to record their debut album, *The Gilded Palace of Sin*, Nudie was the obvious choice to help put together their look.

Nudie and his staff made outfits for all four of the Burritos, each to their own tastes



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and whims. Hillman, who played guitar and shared vocals and songwriting credits with Parsons, opted for a lush cobalt blue suit with peacocks on the front and a giant sun on the back. Peter “Sneaky Pete” Kleinow, the band’s pedal steel player, requested a suit embroidered with a pterodactyl and a tyrannosaurus rex. Bassist Chris Ethridge asked that his Edwardian frock coat and pants be covered in a classic motif of red and yellow roses. “We talked for months and months before we put it together,” Manuel told me. He stitched the embroidery on Parsons’s suit himself because Rose Clements, Nudie’s chief embroiderer, refused to sew the pictures of drugs and naked women.

Parsons may have been going for an authentic country look, but his suit was equally tongue-in-cheek, like some of his songs. The rhinestones and cross are in homage to classic country culture, while the marijuana gave a blatant middle finger to that world. The suit cut the other way, too, celebrating hippie drugs in high redneck style. Nudie’s designs conveyed a subtler narrative—that of the Southern innocent forever corrupted by urban life. In country music, the narrator often ends up calling the past his home, but Parsons’s past offered no solace.

Though now considered a classic, *The Gilded Palace of Sin* sold dismally. *Rolling Stone* critic and fellow Waycross native Stanley Booth gave it a rave review and Dylan said the album “instantly knocked me out,” but the Burritos’ music was still too rock for country audiences and too country for the rock set.

At the time, the album’s greatest success belonged to Nudie—four months after *Gilded*’s release, he was featured on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Before long, John Lennon, Janis Joplin, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, Sly Stone, and Boatsy Collins, among others, would all wear his styles, inspiring Western wear’s popularity in the 1970s. But in early 1968, the Burritos caught flack for their bedazzled attire. “Just because we wear sequined suits doesn’t mean we think we’re great,” Parsons said. “It means we think sequins are great.”

The drugs that decorated “Sin City” eventually began to catch up to Parsons; he had started using barbiturates and heroin. In April of 1970 he released a middling second album with the Burritos, *Burrito Deluxe*. Two months later, Hillman, who was growing tired of Parsons’s “rock-star games,” fired him on the spot when he showed up late and high to a gig.

Afterward, Parsons went to hang out with Keith Richards, with whom he’d developed a friendship solidified by drugs and music, at Nellcôte, the French villa where the Stones were recording *Exile on Main Street*. Today, many attribute the band’s new direction on that album to Parsons’s influence, particularly its twangier numbers, even if the Stones did boot him from their idyll.

Eventually, Parsons got clean enough to cut a solo album, *GP*, featuring the harmonies of Emmylou Harris, then an unknown. *Rolling Stone* reviewer Bud Scoppa saw Parsons and Harris perform during their tour, and wrote: “That night—for me, at least—Gram Parsons was transformed into a latter-day Hank Williams: an innovator still revering the past and proud to be bound to it, an anguished genius daring to use his pain as the foundation of his art, no matter what the consequences. He was beautiful, but there was danger in the beauty.”

Hank Williams had been a client of Nudie’s, and the two had grown close before Williams’s tragic death at twenty-nine. Likewise, Parsons and Nudie developed a strong bond. “Nudie took him under his wing like he would a son,” according to the designer’s granddaughter Jamie Lee Nudie. But, she remembers, Nudie’s wife, Bobbie, often said that there was simply something deeply sad about Parsons.

After the tour for *GP*, Parsons was arrested for getting into a drunken, drug-inspired bar fight, and Nudie bailed him out—but no one, not even Parsons’s closest friends, could save him from himself. “Nudie saw what was happening, and it devastated him,” said Jamie Lee.

In 1973, at twenty-six, Parsons died of an overdose in Joshua Tree, California, right before the release of his follow-up solo effort, *Grievous Angel*. Gram had traveled far in his short life, but ultimately could not escape the illness that also claimed his parents’ lives: addiction.

Though Parsons is not a Country Music Hall of Fame inductee, his Nudie suit is on display at the museum, where it celebrates Parsons’s and Nudie’s respective revolutionary approaches of conjoining two otherwise opposing aesthetics: country and rock. Filling a glass case between two guitars, the suit also stands as a compelling sartorial portrait of Parsons the man and musician, the sinner and seeker. Like much of his Cosmic American Music, it is made all the more haunting for its irony and beauty, and the story of its grievous angel whose life was shot through with loss. 🍀

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## Down Yonder

BY  
GREG REISH

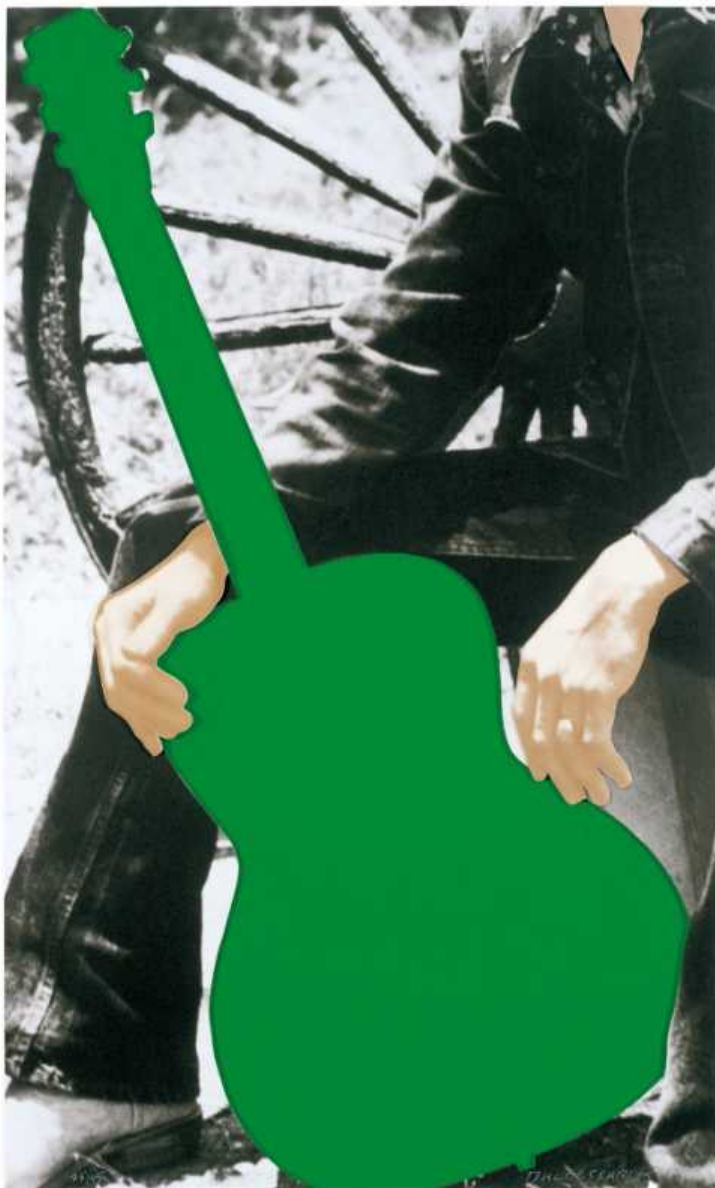
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Gordon Tanner was seventeen when he found himself thrust before a microphone, fiddle in hand, at a makeshift Bluebird recording studio in San Antonio’s Texas Hotel. He was a long way from North Georgia. His father Gid—chicken farmer, contest fiddler, and cofounder of the original Skillet Lickers band in 1926—stood beside him, along with the blind guitarist and singer Riley Puckett, a prolific recording artist and bona fide hillbilly star. The rest of the band’s original lineup had changed by 1934, leaving Gordon to take the lead instrumental role previously occupied by Skillet Lickers fiddlers Clayton McMichen, Bert Layne, and the one-handed Lowe Stokes, who played with a prosthetic bow holder after his right hand was shot off during a fight.

Frank Walker, the cigar-chomping A&R man at Columbia Records who signed Bessie Smith (and later, at MGM, Hank Williams), is largely credited with assembling the Skillet Lickers. Based upon his success with Smith, Walker had been put in charge of Columbia’s new “Old Familiar Tunes” catalog in 1925, a collection of what we would now describe as country music. He built Columbia’s catalog swiftly and steadily, going head-to-head with Ralph Peer’s work at Okeh and Victor Records. In 1923, Peer had scored the first real commercial success in country music with his recordings of Atlanta’s Fiddlin’ John Carson, so naturally Walker set his sights on Gid Tanner, Carson’s rival at the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers’ Convention.

Tanner came to New York several times in 1924 to record for Columbia, bringing his friend Riley Puckett along with him. Within a couple of years, Puckett became one of Walker’s biggest country stars, the “King of the Hillbillys,” whose mellifluous baritone and powerful delivery proved a successful vehicle for the parlor and novelty songs still popular in the mid-1920s. (“We don’t need Jimmie Rodgers,”





Walker reportedly quipped, upon hearing Peer's recordings from the Bristol sessions. "We've got Riley Puckett.")

Walker liked the musical combination of Puckett and Tanner, and saw an opportunity to bring together two of Atlanta's best-known musicians to create a hit machine for his record company. Of course, he understood that Gid's popularity was based largely on cut-up showmanship rather than musical prowess, on his ability to perform comedic tricks onstage and imitate a wide variety of voices. To add some fiddle chops to the group, Walker snagged Clayton McMichen, a younger, hipper, and jazzier virtuoso who had been building his own fan base as leader of the Hometown Boys on Atlanta's WSB radio.

Walker's instincts paid off. From their recording debut in 1926 to their departure from Columbia in 1931, the Skillet Lickers were one of the most commercially successful string bands in the nation. Their sound was like no other—a wildly careening juggernaut, insanely contrapuntal, and, although their repertoire was largely made up of dance tunes, not particularly danceable.

In the Skillet Lickers' arrangements, two, sometimes three, fiddles pretended to play together, but diverse abilities and stylistic chasms kept them apart just enough to dilate the melody, replacing its clear line with a dissonant, snaking heterophony worthy of Tibetan oboe music. Puckett, meanwhile, took advantage of his proximity to the microphone as lead singer to assert his powerful and eccentric bass-string

runs on guitar, deliberately letting his phrasing fall out of sync with that of the fiddles. As each musician vied for attention, it was a thrilling contest of wills, an electrifying and precarious frenzy. Even today, the joy and excitement of listening to those classic Columbia sides lie in the music's inherent instability, the feeling that the whole enterprise might come crashing down at any moment.

By the time Gordon Tanner joined the group, it was the dark days of the Depression, and the raucous bands that had been so popular over the previous decade—none more than the Skillet Lickers—were losing their appeal in the face of country crooners, cowboy singers, and sweet brother duets. But this music was Gordon's family legacy. The Bluebird session was as much a beginning for him as it was a swan song for hillbilly music's first supergroup.

The first sign of its decline had come in 1931, when Clayton McMichen left the group to form the Georgia Wildcats, a more swing-oriented group that included, for a time, a young Merle Travis. After the 1934 recording session in San Antonio, the Skillet Lickers' commercial viability as a professional old-time string band continued to wane. Even so, Gid and Gordon kept the group going, through the lean years of the war and the postwar rise of honky-tonk, bluegrass, and, eventually, the Nashville Sound.

Gordon was an excellent fiddler, and he accompanied his father at small-time gigs around northeast Georgia, the two of them usually picking up musicians from a loose network of acquaintances along the way. (For years, the region was littered with dozens of former Skillet Lickers.) They played on the steps of the Gwinnett County courthouse, for area dances and church gatherings, and hosted regular jam sessions in the Chicken House—a real chicken house turned musical man cave—at their family's homestead in Dacula.

After Gid died in 1960, Gordon continued these traditions, bringing his son Phil and grandson Russ into the family music-making. Banjoist Uncle John Patterson and guitarist Smokey Joe Miller, who had played with Riley Puckett and understood that idiosyncratic style as well as anyone, became regular Skillet Lickers. Soon, a young professor from the university over in Athens started showing up with his banjo and tape machine.

It was a warm evening in May 2015 when I turned off Georgia 316, the bustling and soulless four-lane highway that runs by warehouses and the Gwinnett County Airport as it cuts a

dreary concrete path between Atlanta and Athens. I was headed toward Gid Tanner's old place in Dacula for the Skillet Lickers' annual Spring Cookout: part church supper, part festival concert, and part family backyard party.

When I arrived, I found Russ Tanner in cargo shorts, flipping burgers and pushing hot dogs around a propane grill. As the current fiddler and occasional mandolinist of the Skillet Lickers, Russ is the most accomplished musician of the group. He and his father, Phil, lead the band in its present formation; Russ's grown boy, Josh, who would have been the fifth-generation Tanner to join up, doesn't play music, though he's got a talent for promotion and helped to organize and publicize the cookout. Russ introduced me to their Dobro player, Fleet Stanley, nephew of Roba Stanley, one of the first women to record country music. Then Russ told me about the time he got to play great-grandpap's fiddle at the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville. Like Gordon before him, Russ knows that the history of country music is the story of his family.

Art Rosenbaum, who'd driven over from Athens, ambled up silently as Russ and I talked over the grill. A smallish man with wisps of gray hair

tucked under a tight-fitting baseball cap, Art is a living legend of traditional Georgia culture. An extraordinary banjo player and singer and a prolific documenter of the old-time and folk music of the region, he came to Georgia from the University of Iowa in 1976 to teach painting at UGA and he's known the Tanner family ever since. Like many of his generation, Art came to old-time music by way of the urban folk revival, then spent the next half-century collecting ballads, spirituals, fiddle music, and blues directly from their homegrown sources. In 2007, a retrospective of his collecting career, *Art of Field Recording*, was issued by Atlanta-based Dust-to-Digital. The following year it won the Grammy for Best Historical Album.

A Jew from upstate New York who grew up in Indiana, Rosenbaum has always been right at home among the Tanners, their extended family, and their conservative Christian community, where music is what brings people together—the shared love for the traditions, the common ground. He's a rare outsider who has made himself an insider, wholly and sincerely. For Art, the music and the people are inseparable.

He told me about his discovery, upon arriving in Georgia forty years before, that Gordon

Tanner had kept his father's legendary band alive. Art shared stories of their jam sessions, of the Skillet Lickers recordings he produced. "Their sound changed," he explained. "They still do some of the old numbers that Gid and Riley liked to do, but they picked up lots of bluegrass and other modern sounds along the way." During a recent show, he asked the man sitting next to him what he thought of the performance. "Pretty good, but they don't sound like the Skillet Lickers," the neighbor replied. "What do you mean?" Art exclaimed. "They are the Skillet Lickers!"

After moving through the buffet line, a typical assortment of chips, slaw, baked beans, and broccoli salad laid out on folding tables near the top of the grassy hill, the modest-sized audience, about fifty people, spread out in folding camp chairs under the shade of oak and sycamore trees. The band started up with little fanfare and began to work through a few Skillet Lickers hoedown favorites like "Rocky Pallet" and "Down Yonder," interspersed with classic country songs and a couple of bluegrass numbers. On fiddle, Russ guided the band confidently through the material on one of the outstanding instruments made by his father. Then Phil took the lead vocal



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and Russ showcased his fiddling on “Listen to the Mockingbird,” a holdover from nineteenth-century parlor music and a crowd favorite with its ornithological catalog of trills, glissandi, harmonics, and other fiddle effects.

Though Art has heard the Skillet Lickers countless times and knows their current sound and repertoire, he treated the show as anything but routine. He moved toward the front of the stage, set up his compact camping stool, and pulled a brick-sized portable digital recorder, stereo microphone, and headphones from the outside pockets of his banjo case. Checking levels, he spoke quietly into the microphone to register the date and location, then sat still, attention undivided, to capture the performance of an old-time string band entering its ninetieth consecutive year.

Phil and Russ eventually called on Art to grab his banjo and join them, which he was happy to do. Art played energetically in the old claw-hammer style, the way Uncle John Patterson used to play with Gordon Tanner. Then Russ reminded Phil that they had another special musical guest, and Phil laughed at himself for having already forgotten the guest’s name. Grabbing my guitar, I climbed onstage, positioning

myself between Art and Russ, and launched into “Way Downtown.”

A homemade sign on the door to the Chicken House reads EST. 1955. It’s not an open-air structure like many coops, but essentially a small rectangular house, with solid walls and a real roof. Russ refers to the place as his “garage,” where he spends much of his free time when he’s not on the road for his day job as a sales rep for a box divider company. He took me inside to show me his recording setup, anchored by a surprisingly large mixing board and an old computer. At the opposite end of the house there’s a self-serve snack bar with candy and a few other items; I grabbed a Skillet Lickers sticker for my guitar case and left two dollars in the fish bowl.

The Chicken House is covered with memorabilia, most of it dusty and under glass. In a large painting by Rosenbaum, Gordon and Phil play their fiddles, and in the background Art rendered a famous photograph of Gid Tanner and Fiddlin’ John Carson standing outside the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers’ Convention at the old Atlanta Auditorium. The original framed photo hangs on a nearby wall along with most of the extant photos of Gid. Inside a glass case a Gibson oval-

hole guitar lies across a publicity photo of Riley Puckett, although it’s not an instrument that he played. Framed 78s with labels from Columbia and Bluebird are hung on the wall in a somewhat haphazard arrangement. There’s an upright piano that looks like it hasn’t been touched in decades, topped with a fiddle, an oil lamp, and a couple cans of bug spray.

Back outside, Phil packed P.A. equipment into the back of his truck, and I offered to lend a hand. I’ve played with all kinds of old-time musicians and bands, but getting to play with the Skillet Lickers—a band I’ve loved and studied for years, a band whose origins are the mythic stuff of country music’s very inception—gave me a special sense of gratification, a palpable connection to history. Phil told me about *Country Music Down Yonder*, the theatrical presentation he and Russ put together. Dressed like 1920s mobsters, band members depict the various figures involved in the Skillet Lickers’ creation: Gid, Riley, Clayton, and even Frank Walker. Phil is proud of the show because it tells his story, the legacy handed down to him from his father and grandfather, and that, in turn, he’s passed on to his kids. “I’m not doing this because I’m an actor or historian,” he said. “I do it because this is who we are.” 🐔



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# DUST & GROOVES FOR THE LOVE OF VINYL

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# Rapp Will Never Die

BY  
WILL STEPHENSON

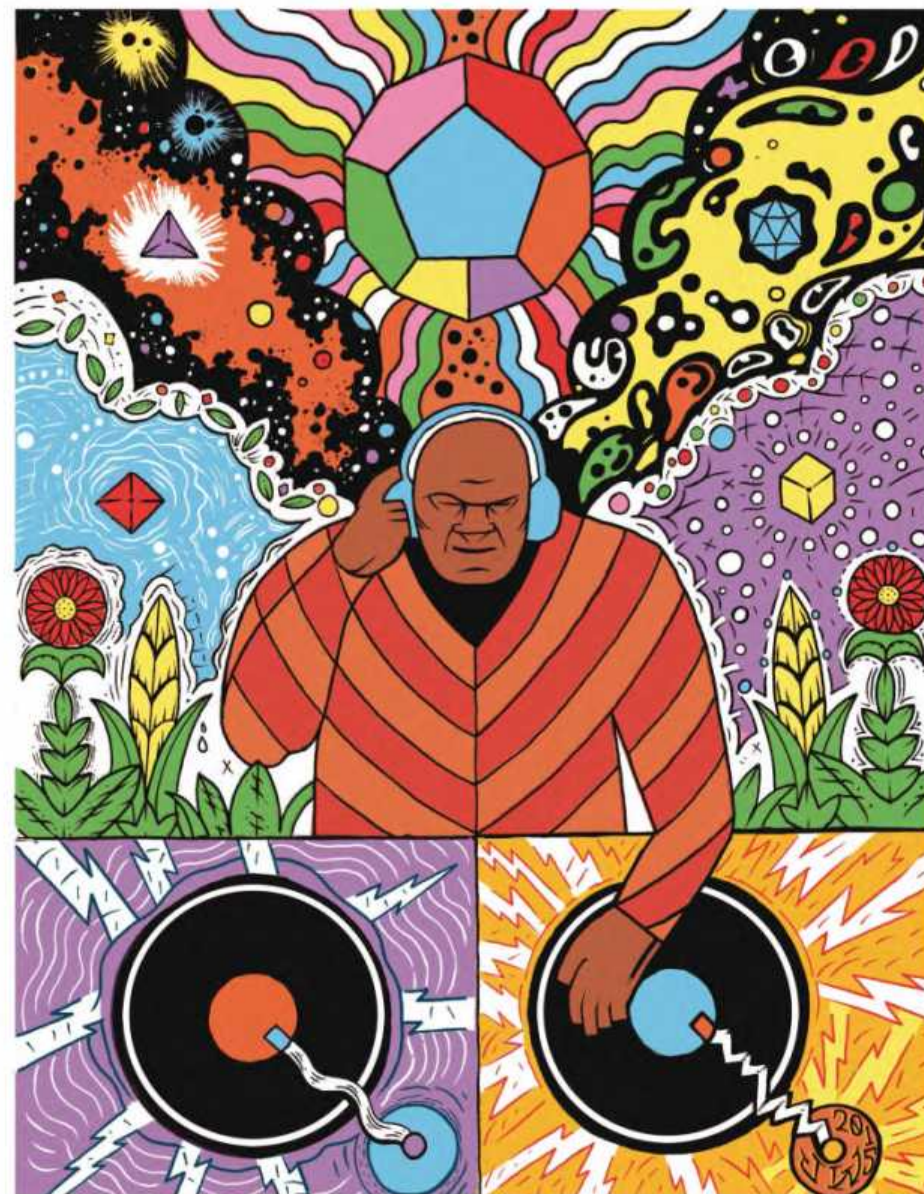
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Ellenwood is a small suburb only twenty minutes from East Atlanta, but MC Shy D has always considered it “the country.” It does have a pastoral quality. On a Friday night in June, it was muggy and green and quiet, and you could stand outside on the patio of the Sports Zone—the bar and grill where Shy D DJs on weekend nights—and watch fireflies disappear and reappear across the mostly empty parking lot.

The Sports Zone occupies the far corner of a dilapidated strip mall, next to a karate school, a Little Caesars Pizza, and a hair salon called The Devil Is A Liar. Inside, the place was dark, awash in pinks and oranges from neon beer logos and a couple of muted TVs. A line of women sat at the bar playing with their hair or leaning over their phones, bored, while six or seven men huddled around the pool table in stern concentration. Shy D was stationed in the back corner behind his equipment, holding court. “Friday night at the Sports Zone,” he said smoothly into the mic. “Free Flow Fridays, you already know.” No one much reacted to this, but he seemed satisfied to have said it.

Shy D, who was born Peter Jones, is large-bodied, bald, and perpetually mellow, with gold front teeth and a slack, friendly expression. That night he wore a plain green t-shirt and blue jeans, his insulin pump attached to his belt (he was diagnosed with diabetes three years ago). You can find him here on weekend nights from nine to two, a shift for which he is paid a flat rate of two hundred dollars. You can tell it is him because the owner of the place, Angel, had his name installed on the wall in the corner: MC SHY D in big brass letters. It was a coup to get him here, she will tell you, and they are understandably proud of his residency.

This is the man, after all, who brought hip-hop to Atlanta. Or anyway, he brought Atlanta to hip-hop—in the mid-eighties, he was the



first rapper from the city to break out of it, to tour the country and make a name for himself. He became an object of adulation to the whole region: *If you was ridin', you was bumping to homie Shy D*, as Jermaine Dupri put it on “Welcome to Atlanta” over a decade ago. Wherever he went, Shy D carried the gospel of Atlanta with him, though these days it’s easy to wonder if the city has forgotten him. He plays other people’s songs now, at this neighborhood bar around the corner from where he grew up. In a year, he will be fifty.

“I listen to the radio every day,” he was telling me. I’d asked him what he thought of contemporary Atlanta rap. “Me being a DJ, I gotta keep up with what’s current. I don’t got no problem with the young boys.” His voice is oddly high-pitched and melodious, just as it

is on his records. While he talked, he gripped one ear of his white Beats by Dre headphones, occasionally reaching over the table to halfheartedly scratch the song back and forth. “You gotta be a DJ with an open ear,” he said, tapping the headphones. “You can’t be a DJ with a bitter heart.” With that, he cued up OutKast’s “Git Up, Git Out” and gripped the mic to sing along with every other line.

Hip-hop was born in the South Bronx, and so was Peter Jones. He was there to witness it, though he wouldn’t be in the foreground of any of the classic photos from the period—he was a kid, born in ’66. He would be in the back of the photograph, or off to the side, a ten-year-old in hand-me-down Reeboks, looking up at the older kids in awe. Carrying their record crates,

untangling their power cords. “Believe it or not, it was beautiful,” he told me of this period. He’s constantly prefacing things that way—“believe it or not.” I tend to believe him.

He was the youngest of three children. His mother worked for the telephone company, and his father manned the assembly line at a General Motors plant, fitting the trim on back windshields. They lived a few floors up in the storied Bronx River Projects, a circle of bland fourteen-story brick structures surrounding playgrounds and asphalt parks. In the early seventies, it was the site of an unending series of battles between local gang the Black Spades and their rivals: among others, there were the Ministers, a white gang formed at Stevenson High School, and the Seven Crowns, who reportedly once waged war with the Spades for ninety-two straight days. In those years, according to historian Steven Hager, the Bronx River Projects were “constantly peppered with gunfire from passing cars.” Many called it Li’l Vietnam.

Things began to change in the mid-seventies, due partly to the efforts of a first-floor resident and amateur DJ whom everyone knew as Afrika Bambaataa. An eccentric who had grown up hunting rabbits with bows and arrows along the banks of the Bronx River, Bambaataa abandoned the Black Spades after his best friend was murdered by the police in 1975. Inspired by a viewing of the 1964 film *Zulu* (starring Michael Caine), he created the Zulu Nation, which aimed to perpetuate the community service angle of the earlier gangs—even the Black Spades had helped register voters and raise money for sickle-cell anemia—without the bloodshed. The Nation also worked security at the parties Bambaataa began hosting in the housing project’s community center, where Jones was barely old enough to go and watch him spin. What Shy D remembers better than these formal sets were the hot afternoons on which Bambaataa wouldn’t bother to rent out the center, but would instead hoist a speaker up to his window and spontaneously play records for the whole neighborhood. This was hip-hop’s larval, laboratory stage, when it was essentially a celebration of the easy accessibility of diverse recorded media. Bambaataa would play Kraftwerk and James Brown and the Monkees, the theme song from *The Pink Panther*.

Years later, Shy D would claim to be Bambaataa’s cousin, a piece of trivia that’s been repeated in almost everything written about him since, though it isn’t strictly true. He says the

ruse was Bambaataa’s idea: the Godfather of Hip-Hop heard “Lil Pete Jones from the projects” was making waves down in Georgia and thought the association would give him a leg up. Either way, it gives you a sense of how important his Bronx heritage was to him. “I was right there at the birth of it,” Shy D says, and he really was. For a while, his older sister even went out with Keith “Cowboy” Wiggins of the Furious Five, the guy often credited with coining the term “hip-hop.” We can forgive him for being proud.

If Shy D was too young to do more than watch, his older siblings were deeply engaged in the burgeoning scene. “My brother and sister was so treacherous up there,” is how he put it, citing constant fights and trouble with the law, which prompted the family’s move down South in 1978 (still a year out from the release of the earliest hip-hop records). Shy D’s father had grown up in Perry, Georgia, and had fond memories of the state—the trees, the climate. They settled in Ellenwood, and Shy D loved it immediately. “In New York, everybody’s on top of everybody,” he said. “There’s too many people. Every time my mom and dad bought us a bike, somebody stole it.” Atlanta was different, he said. It was “the country.”

The story of Atlanta rap begins, technically, in South Carolina. The Augusta metro area extends warily across the eastern Georgia border to include the county of Aiken, home to the studios of an urban radio station that used to be known as WZZW. There, one Saturday night in 1979, a DJ named Danny Hankinson played Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” for the first time and decided it would sound better in outer space.

Hankinson was an Aiken native, the son of a minister, and a foster father of three. He DJed at supper clubs and skating rinks in and around Augusta under the name Danny Renée, and while he didn’t recognize “Rapper’s Delight” as any kind of cultural milestone—he wasn’t even sure what to call it, opting for “rhyming song” in an interview with the local newspaper—he knew it was a hit, and that he wanted to make one of his own. “I played it on my Saturday show and liked it and decided to write one myself,” he told the paper. He held auditions at a local high school and enlisted three teenagers to accompany him to the Melody Recording Service in Atlanta, where they recorded “Space Rap” (credited to Danny Renée & The Charisma Crew), a song that’s both utterly inexplicable and strangely prophetic.

It’s probably dangerous to declare anything the “first” of a particular genre from a given city, but “Space Rap” is by some margin the earliest Atlanta rap single I’ve ever heard. As it was based so directly on the song that singlehandedly popularized hip-hop in the first place, it’s hard to imagine how anyone else could have beaten Hankinson to the punch. Fifteen years before OutKast declared themselves ATLians or began a song with a mechanized “Greetings, earthlings,” Hankinson was already following the same muse: “What’s happening, earthlings?” his record begins, in a robotic vocoder monotone. “There is no need for alarm.”

“Space Rap” was an anomaly. In the early eighties, the Atlanta music scene was still dominated by funk groups like Brick, the S.O.S. Band, and Cameo. The only local rapper with any real profile before Shy D was Mo-Jo, a sort of outsider artist who emerged with a 1982 novelty single called “Battmann: Let Mo-Jo Handle It,” featuring a kazoo interpolation of the *Batman* theme song. “He never made it past the Georgia state line,” Shy D said of Mo-Jo, laughing. “He’s doing great though. He’s worked at UPS for like twenty-seven years, so shit, he about to retire.”

We were talking at a pizza place called Gino’s, one of Shy D’s favorite spots. It was about one in the morning, and he’d arrived with his friends Deando, an aspiring rapper, and Big Marc, a tow-truck driver who toured with Shy D years ago and later managed one of the other great early Georgia MCs, Hitman Sammy Sam. Shy D was talking about the start of his career, which struck him as absurd in retrospect. He’d been a working DJ since junior high, but after high school he got a job parking cars at the Ritz-Carlton in Buckhead (he parked Jesse Jackson’s car, the Whispers’ tour bus). Soon he was spending late nights at Club Phoenix and even later nights at the Charles Disco out on Simpson Road (“a li’l spot where young men and young women go to experience their first little taste of the nightlife,” as André 3000 once described the place). About a year into the parking job, he won a contest and wound up the opening act at a gig for Gigolo Tony and Lacey Lace, where he impressed their manager, an A&R woman for the upstart Miami Bass label 4-Sight. She offered him a deal that night, and the next day he caught a Greyhound headed for South Florida. This was a glorious time. “When I got down there—and I’m not trying to be funny—” he told me, “I saw the fucking women, and I went crazy. The reason I say that is, Miami



got a certain type of woman.” He leaned back and closed his eyes, revisiting the beach of his memory. “It was like God said, I’m gonna bless you.”

In a studio in Fort Lauderdale, the owner of 4-Sight, a former bail bondsman named Billy Hines, asked Shy D if he had any ideas for his first single. He did. He played him the *Pink Panther* theme song (a nod to Bambaataa), banged out a rhythm on a table for producer Frank “Thumbs” Cornelius, and began rapping about his own place in history. He called it “Rapp Will Never Die,” an odd claim for a genre still more or less in its infancy. His line of thinking was, he says: *It’s not gonna die, because it’s my turn now.* Unexpectedly, to everyone but Shy D, the song blew up. It was immediate. Atlanta now had something to say, it seemed, and its voice was high-pitched and proud and lurid. Shy D found himself touring the Southeast and making real money. It was beautiful, he told me, with a smile that showed off his gold teeth, “until I started fucking my manager.”

This was 1986. One night Shy D was running late for a sound check at a Miami nightclub called the Bass Station, an extravagant temple to low-end frequencies, with “about fifty-two

speakers” on each side of the stage. He got a call from the club’s owner, Norberto Morales, a reputed coke dealer nicknamed Candyman, who was growing impatient. “I’m paying your ass \$5,000,” Morales told him, “I need your ass here.” This was news to Shy D, who thought his rate was only \$1,500. Blowing off the concert altogether, he went home to confront his manager, and now girlfriend, whom he blamed for the misunderstanding. They got into a shouting match, and he called himself a cab. That was the end of his relationship with 4-Sight Records.

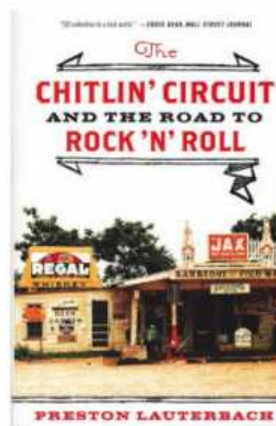
Fortunately Shy D had already made a fan out of a promoter named Luther Campbell, a former DJ already emerging as a Miami music scene mogul. Though he would later become better known for other things—getting sued by George Lucas, running unsuccessfully for mayor—Campbell was first and foremost a Southern hip-hop pioneer, and he got word to Shy D that he was interested in adding him to his stable of artists at Luke Skywalker Records, a roster anchored then by the group 2 Live Crew, who had not yet become internationally infamous for the First Amendment victories they’d achieve in defense of songs like “Me So Horny.” Shy D signed the contract, and within

a year he’d released his first two albums, *Got to Be Tough* and *Comin’ Correct in 88*.

The first was blunt and complicated and rugged—a notable hit on the independent music charts—but the second was a genuine leap forward, an audible departure from Shy D’s New York roots in favor of something grimmer, loopier, more distinctly Southern. He’d recruited new collaborators, Mike Fresh and DJ Toomp, and the three of them posed on the album cover in University of Georgia gear, with Shy D in front taking a knee. They conceived the album together in Shy D’s parents’ basement, where he was still living, and recorded it in a studio owned by his friends in the reggae band Inner Circle (who at the time were recording “Bad Boys,” the future theme song to *Cops*). For the first time, on *Comin’ Correct*, Atlanta was presented as a point of pride, an imaginative space of possibility. *The people all over want to know where I be*, he rapped on “Atlanta That’s Where I Stay.” *Not in New York, in the cold drinking Fanta. But coolin’ down south where it’s hot, in Atlanta.*

Shy D still lived with his parents after the albums came out, but he expanded his car

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collection and happily spent money on other people. Wednesday through Saturday nights, he would take a dozen of his closest friends out on the town, everyone on his tab. “When you’re making money,” he explained, “you don’t think it’ll never stop.” Other homegrown rappers were beginning to emerge, and Shy D saw them as harbingers of a new generation, one he wasn’t entirely comfortable with. Kilo, Raheem the Dream, the Hard Boyz—they were colder, less cartoonish, and more interested in telegraphing a form of brash authenticity that didn’t come as naturally to him. He felt threatened, and they in turn openly resented his success. “One thing I noticed about Atlanta,” he remembers, “these motherfuckers here were very jealous. Don’t nobody want to see nobody bigger than them.”

Local rap radio was cliquish and fickle, and often seemed to deliberately ignore Shy D, which stung. But he had the support of the only tastemaker who mattered: Edward Landrum, a.k.a. King Edward J, a record store owner who wore a wide-brimmed black hat, rolled his R’s prominently, and spoke in a rhyming patois of his own invention (*I am the king, doing my thing, making Decatur sound much grrreater*). Landrum was a kind of carnival barker who distributed an ongoing series of influential “J Tapes,” establishing the Atlanta hip-hop canon in real time. Shy D was a mainstay, so his local esteem was secure.

Any number of subtle maneuvers can derail a music career, however, and Shy D made a lot of them in short succession. Some not so subtle. First, he left the Luke label, losing their distribution and promotional networks. He had his reasons for leaving—“He had a suspicion he wasn’t getting everything he was owed; his royalty statements would show a negative balance while his records were on the *Billboard* chart,” his attorney, Richard Wolfe, told reporters years later, when Shy D decided to sue—but the move nevertheless cost him. “I killed my goddamn self,” he told me of this decision. “My career went from here”—he held his hand over his head—“to here,” he said, slapping his palm down hard on the table.

Right then, at this crucial moment of transition, with a whole lot riding on what he decided to do next: he shot someone. It happened in the parking lot outside of a club in Atlanta. The man was yelling and pressing him and insulting him. An Ellenwood native—Shy D had known him for years. The shooting, he is quick to point out, was both nonfatal and justified. “He was a big bully. One of those

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# Talking Drum #1

*Senegambia, West Africa, c. 18th century*

BY  
HONORÉE FANONNE  
JEFFERS

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In his call to the marketplace  
the *griot* urges the skin clasps  
the first beat He will eat tonight  
for his message I am listening  
Code of the village that I left  
*What do you bear Ub*  
The journey to the sea’s  
moneyed beauty Proverbs  
in my footsteps *Teeth are white*  
*but sit in a bed of blood* There are  
many at the market A noble  
is accused of heresy A man mortgaged  
his nephew and bought a lovely  
farm The *griot* pulls the skin  
sings tension on the air Tomorrow  
there will be war He will  
beat on smoke and wood  
*Who is coming Ub* The women  
brought hot peppers  
The fishes’ eyes cry clearly



kind of motherfuckers who'll come up to you, slap you, and when he slaps you, he's digging through your pockets. He had everybody terrorized." The judge disagreed: aggravated assault. Shy D went to prison.

It was close to three A.M. now, and Gino's was quiet and nearly emptied out. We were sitting outside on the patio, with a postcard view of the downtown Atlanta skyline, brightly lit up for whatever goes on in those buildings overnight. Shy D talked about old music for a while longer, about how Atlanta had changed, about fishing. We talked about what he had planned for the next day, before his DJ shift: "I like to nap all day before I work," he said. "I'm lazy like that."

He was stalling, because the rest of the story isn't great. It's not over, and it gets better toward the end, but there were hardships suffered along the way. He was only in prison for a couple of years, but these were important years. And after he got out, in 1993, Shy D never entirely regained his footing in the scene. He had some local hits, songs like "True to the Game," in the video for which he appeared in a convict's striped jumpsuit. He performed at the citywide street party Freaknik at Piedmont Park—that was a

highlight. But he was on the outgoing tide during a sea change, and he knew it. He remembers sharing a couple of billings with a young Out-Kast around 1994, precocious teenagers, new to the industry. They were polite, respectful, earnest. André 3000, especially, seemed "just happy to be there," Shy D recalled. Their music boasted a level of sophistication that was both an expansion of his own achievements and a rejection of them. He couldn't help but admire it. "Believe it or not, Dre's mom used to work with my dad at General Motors," he told me, kind of dreamily. "My dad knew his mom."

Shy D went broke, and quickly. In a few years, he burned through his settlement with Luther Campbell, which was substantial (\$1.62 million, according to *Billboard*). There were the lawyer fees, the cars, a new place for his parents, a condo in Stone Mountain. "I just live a carefree life, man," he told me. "I don't cherish shit. Only thing I didn't know was that this thing would come to an end." This was rock bottom. He tried selling crack for a while, only to people he knew. When that dried up, Shy D and his friend Big Marc settled into a new routine selling bootleg DVDs outside of a check-cashing place, making about \$40 a day, then retiring to a Chi-

nese restaurant around the corner. Atlanta rap, meanwhile, was gathering steam as a national phenomenon. "I said to myself, this music shit is a younger man's game now. It's time for me to move on and do other things. I kinda just lost the love for it."

Shy D was never bitter. If anything, he seems indifferent, even upbeat about the arc of his career. "You did what you did once upon a time," he said, shrugging, "but it's over. These young kids don't think about me. They don't give a fuck about Shy D. Shy who?" There are indications this might be changing. Overseas, in Europe, his tapes are collectors' items—they care about history there, he says. Not long ago, he was invited to appear in a VH1 documentary about Atlanta hip-hop. He laughs when he talks about these things—he sees the humor in it. But I get the sense that there are still too many nights like the recent Friday he mentioned more than once, when a fledgling young rapper approached his booth at the Sports Zone and held out a CD, insisting he should play it. Shy D's friend Deando was there and raised his arm to block the boy, saying, "Don't you know who this is?" The kid didn't even flinch. "Yeah," he said. "He's the DJ." 🐓



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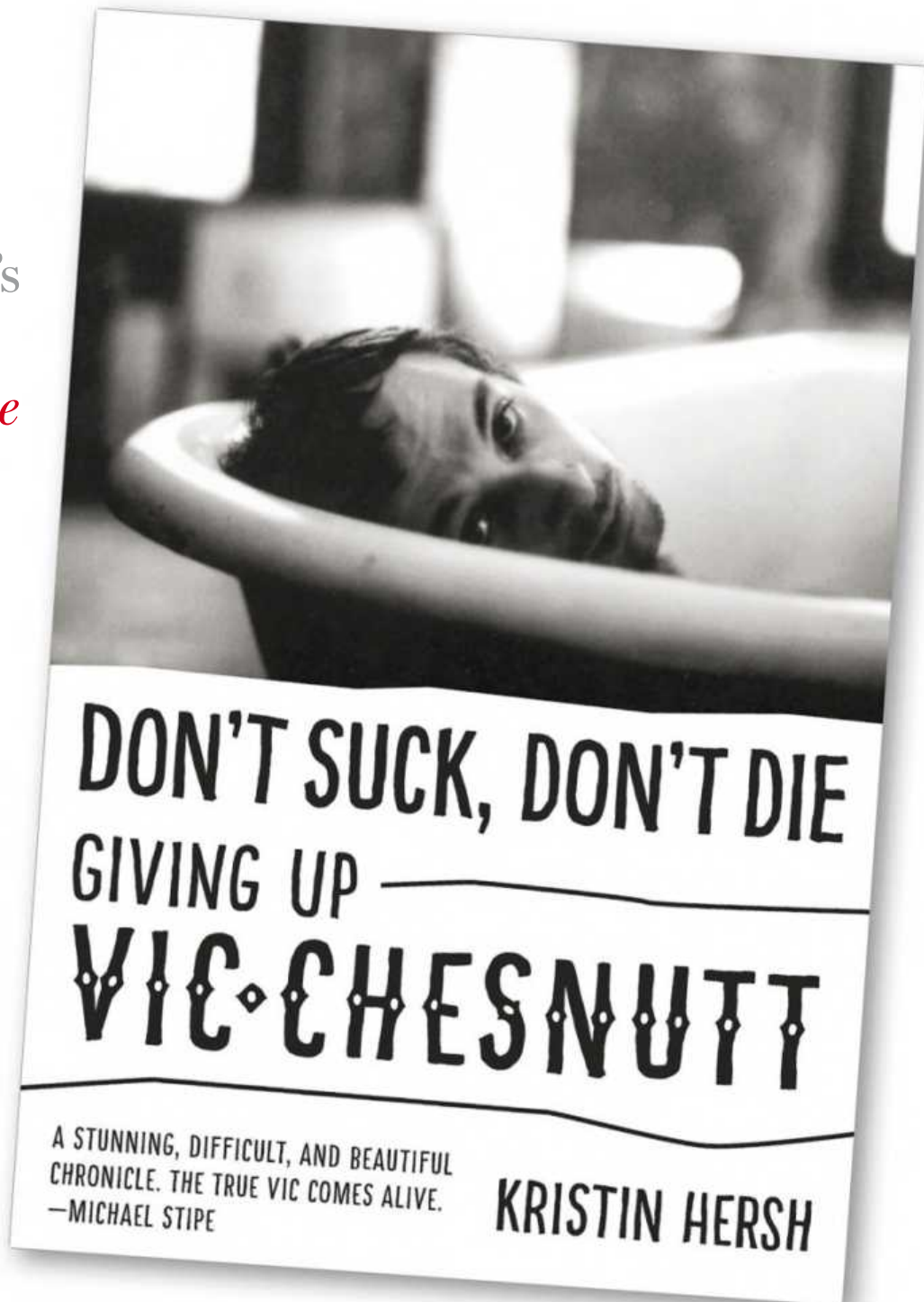
Organized by the Art Gallery of Ontario, Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, and the Terra Foundation for American Art, which is also recognized for its generous support. LEFT: Albert Bierstadt, *Yosemite Valley* (detail), 1868, oil on canvas. Collection of the Oakland Museum of California, gift of Miss Marguerite Laird in memory of Mr. and Mrs. P.W. Laird. MIDDLE: Martin Johnson Heade, *Newburyport Marshes: Approaching Storm* (detail), ca. 1871, oil on canvas. Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection. RIGHT: Lawren Stewart Harris, *Grounded Icebergs* (detail), ca. 1931, oil on canvas. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, gift from the Estate of R. Fraser Elliott. © Estate of Lawren Harris.

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## Lead Me Home

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To send him home, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. requested a modern gospel composition performed by its greatest singer. In 1968, Mahalia Jackson sang out of pain, she sang out of praise, at both the funeral at

Ebenezer Baptist Church and the memorial at Morehouse College. She was a large black woman with a kind and pleasant face. When she opened her voice and unleashed this powerful praise music, she vocalized the sentiments that form the foundation of the modern black church:

*Precious Lord, take my hand,  
Lead me on, let me stand.  
I'm tired, I'm weak, I'm 'lone.  
Through the storm, through the night,  
Lead me on to the light.  
Take my hand, precious Lord,  
Lead me home.*

Though often mistaken for a hymn, “Take My Hand, Precious Lord” is a copyrighted composition. If you were to see the sheet music displayed on an upright piano in church,

you would see the name Thomas A. Dorsey, songwriter and pianist, who wrote it in 1932. Dorsey was born in 1899 in Villa Rica, Georgia, which he described as “a little settlement there where they had a few stores and the train came through.” His father was a gifted traveling preacher and his mother played organ in church, staying within the written music of the hymnbook—young Dorsey learned to play the organ organically, by observing her. In childhood he was exposed to two contrasting styles of music. One style was that of his mother: shape-note singing and hymns that were available in mainstream church hymnals. He also heard improvised songs that had links to slavery and which were still vibrant in the black communities of rural Georgia.

When he invented modern gospel, years later, Dorsey created a bridge between those worlds. He wrote songs like a bluesman because

he was a bluesman. And he taught choirs to sing that way: calling to God, guided by the musical structure of the blues.

In 1908, the Dorseys moved to Atlanta in search of new opportunities. Thomas took a job as a concession boy at the 81 Theatre downtown, where he learned from the house pianists who played for silent films and stage shows. When he was a teenager, he read the *Chicago Defender*, a leading black newspaper that presented commentaries about the racial injustices of the South. The paper encouraged its readership to consider moving to Chicago for a better life. This appealed to Dorsey, and he relocated there in the fall of 1916, with plans to develop his craft in the wineroms and house parties of the city's blossoming music scene.

A few years after he moved, Dorsey met a fellow who would change his life: J. Mayo "Ink" Williams, the talent scout for Paramount Records. Williams saw recording star potential in a black vaudeville stage veteran named Ma Rainey. In 1923, he asked her to record for Paramount. Rainey asked Dorsey to form her tour band. He said yes, arranging the songs and teaching the band how to play them, showcasing three types of music: the vaudeville and pop Ma Rainey was known for; the blues she recorded for Paramount; and Southern "hot" jazz, a new phenomenon at the time. Dorsey assumed the stage name Georgia Tom, the group was called the Wild Cats Jazz Band, and the show took off.

The band rocked crowds every night in theaters all over the Midwest and the South, where there was a hunger and a need for authentic black blues performance. Ma Rainey brought something wholly new to the concert experience of down-home blues. Up to that point, this music had been confined to low-grade black theaters and hole-in-the-wall rent parties. Now it emerged in mainstream black theaters.

Dorsey had renewed his faith in the church at a 1921 National Baptist Convention in Chicago, where he was moved by one of the singing evangelists who added embellishments and subtleties to the music written on paper. The nature of structured improvisation hit Dorsey to the core. "My inner being was thrilled," he said. "My soul was a deluge of divine rapture; my emotions were aroused; my heart was inspired to become a singer and worker in the Kingdom of the Lord—and impress people just as this great singer did that Sunday morning."

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Dorsey again turned to God when he suffered a nervous breakdown in 1926. He quit Ma Rainey's band. His idea was to write songs that would preach the word of the Lord while using the structure, form, and nuances of the blues. "If You See My Savior" was his first gospel blues. He copyrighted the song and distributed it to churches in Chicago. He elicited help from his family and fellow church patrons to mail promo copies and sell the sheet music door to door.

Though the gospel publishing business started slow, it would prove to be a smart move; as the demand for the blues began to die down, the demand for black sacred music began to rise. Michael Harris writes in *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church*, "By the early 1930s, the scene in old-line black urban churches had become that of a perplexing potpourri of white main-line Protestant and Southern Afro-American religious rituals. Neither group seemed able to claim an entire worship to its liking." Gospel blues represented a "new mode of religious expression." As he began to introduce the gospel blues into the church music communities of Chicago, Dorsey was an innovator, the only game in town. Alas, it was impossible for him

to support himself selling sheet music.

In 1928, Dorsey met a young guitarist named Hudson Whittaker, better known as Tampa Red. Tampa Red was another Georgia boy; he was from Smithville, a town near Columbus. As Georgia Tom, Dorsey began to collaborate with Tampa Red, making it big with "It's Tight Like That," performed in a humorous style that came to be called hokum. Business was good. Georgia Tom's rollicking barrelhouse piano combined with Tampa Red's slide guitar, creating a sound that was unlike anything else on record.

A source of great happiness in Dorsey's life was his wife, Nettie Harper, whom he met when he was twenty-six. They were married during one of his breaks from touring with Ma Rainey, then Nettie joined the band on the road as wardrobe mistress. After Dorsey had the nervous breakdown, she supported the family, working in a laundry by day and nursing her husband by night. By 1932, they finally had some financial stability. But Dorsey's world collapsed when Nettie died in childbirth. Their newborn son died the next day. Out of this tragedy came Dorsey's greatest composition.

He eased his pain by composing at the piano,

tinkering with and adapting a hymn written in 1852, "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?" He asked a friend, the pianist and composer Theodore Frye, for his reaction to the new song. In response to Dorsey's lyrics, Frye said, "Don't call Him 'Blessed Lord.' Call Him 'Precious Lord.'" Dorsey took heed. While he didn't know it yet, he had created a song that would outshine all his compositions. Harris writes, "The marriage of Dorsey's musical and textual voices, as represented by the composition of 'Take My Hand, Precious Lord,' amounted to the final resolution of the warring interpersonal dualities in Dorsey's life." Dorsey had written a blues text set to gospel music.

An ambitious performer and businessman who'd spent years trying to profit from his compositions, Dorsey was finally able to use his drive to glorify God. He'd found solace in his newest and greatest creation. Now, he just needed to find someone to sing the song.

After seeking out several vocalists, Dorsey thought of Mahalia Jackson, whom he had met in 1928. He was impressed by her ability to win over a crowd with her charismatic nature; he felt she created a sense of community with each performance. Yet Dorsey also saw that she



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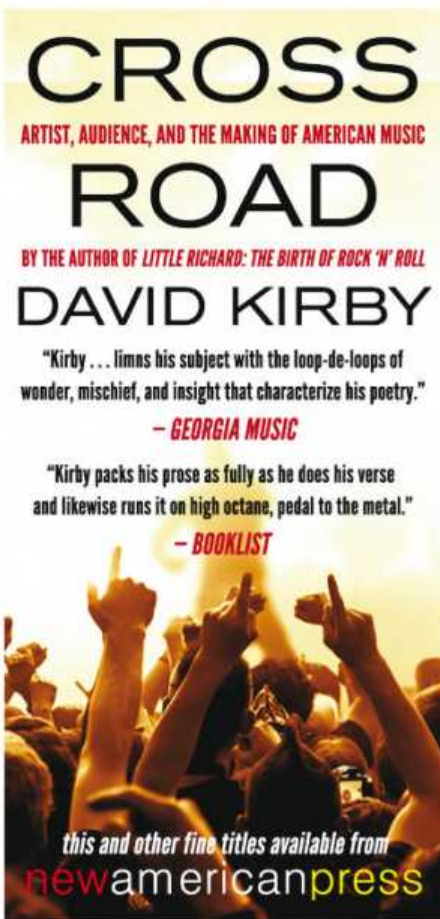
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William Eggleston, American, b. 1939, *Peaches*, ca. 1971. Dye transfer print, AP, Eugenia Buxton Whitford Funds 76.6.1

needed work to reach her full potential. She could get the audience “patting their hands,” as he said, but she could not cut deep into their hearts like a blues singer. Of course, this was Dorsey’s specialty, and by 1932 he had plenty of practice coaching sacred and secular performers.

“Take My Hand, Precious Lord” would be Dorsey’s legacy not only because of the song itself or because of Mahalia Jackson’s eventual performance. (Jackson is still considered the true personification of gospel music.) The powerful sound of gospel came from the natural voices of a people who had been repressed for many years, in and out of their own communities. Gospel gave the black community a freedom they had never before had.

As 1932 gave way to 1933, Dorsey was elected the first director of the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses. It had been nearly one year since the death of his wife and child. From this new position, he would organize gospel choruses and continue to write songs—four hundred in all, up until his death on January 23, 1993. He never returned to playing the blues or hokum. As he put it, “this is better over here where I am.” 🐦



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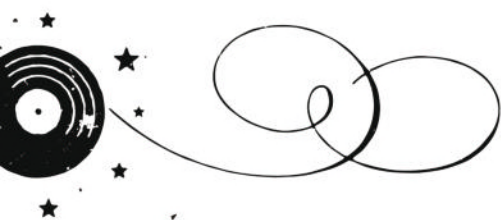






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FOREVER  
BY  
AMANDA PETRUSICH





I had this idea that I could arrive in Macon, Georgia, via rental sedan, nose around for a day or two, and figure something out about the South, and rock music in the South, and men in the South, and men, and death, and guitars, and the Allman Brothers Band, who, in the late 1960s, engineered a new style of rock music that was deeply and earnestly influenced by rhythm & blues but also by something else—some wildness I couldn't isolate or define or deny.

I was coming to Macon from a book festival in Tallahassee. All weekend, I'd kept announcing to my hosts that I'd never spent any time in North Florida before, but that wasn't entirely true: a couple years earlier, I'd spent two days chasing bigfoots—or the myth of bigfoots—around the Apalachicola National Forest on a goofy newspaper assignment. North Florida is the sort of place where bigfoots seem plausible, even likely. It is the sort of place you go to and then forget that you have been there.

Duane and Gregg Allman attended Seabreeze High School, a couple hundred miles southeast of Tallahassee in Daytona Beach, a spring break boomtown situated on what's sometimes known as the Fun Coast (an appellation that evokes, for me, a whole cornucopia of not-fun things, like date rape and dismemberment). Daytona is beloved, globally, for its hard-packed beaches and motorsports. The air is heavy with ozone, exhaust, Coppertone.

Sometimes I think I can hear Daytona in Duane's earliest guitar solos. There's a sticky, melting-popsicle quality to those licks. When the sun rises in North Florida, everything slumps a little, dribbles: the live oaks saddled with Spanish moss, the condensation sliding down a Coors can, all of it bending back toward

earth, ready to be swallowed up—to return, prodigally. I couldn't catch a breath there. My hair curled. After a while, the atmosphere makes a person feel a little vulnerable. Any masks, actual or metaphoric, drip right off your face.

Duane was born in Nashville in 1946. Gregg followed one year and eighteen days later, delivered by the same doctor in the same hospital. Their father, Willis Turner Allman, an Army lieutenant and gunnery sergeant—he had crawled onto a beach at Normandy—was murdered the day after Christmas, 1949, when the boys were three and two years old. He was shot by a stranger he had met playing pool, had given a ride to. Details about the night are scant. Gregg writes about it a bit in his autobiography: "I don't have the slightest memory of my father, nothing." Willis's killer, a dude named Buddy Green, likely told him to turn off onto some unmarked dirt road. Something happened, a botched robbery, everyone split. Green was a veteran, too—shell-shocked. He plugged three bullets into Willis's back that night, then was caught and lived the rest of his life in prison. Geraldine "Mama A" Allman raised her two sons alone.

Young Duane was a quick study at the guitar, which he took up at age thirteen. Gregg had taught Duane his first chords on an old Silvertone from Sears—simple things, E, A, B, the three-chord turnaround—but, as he's said, Duane soon passed him as if he were standing still. Whatever intangible, miraculous thing it is that separates a very good guitarist from a great one—Duane had that, in excess. I suppose it's a kind of vulnerability: a willingness to be exposed down to the marrow, to live as if you were stuck inside an X-ray machine, with everyone always seeing all your parts and how you work. Listening to Duane, you get the sense you're receiving everything he had, straight, that he was uninterested in or incapable of mediating his presence while playing. That's Duane.

There is a posed photo of Gregg and Duane from around this time (they must've been high school freshmen). Save a height difference, they are nearly identical: blond and blonder. They started playing together, formed a duo, booked gigs up and down the strip in Daytona, first as the Escorts and then as the Allman Joys. They picked up a few more players, got started on the chitlin' circuit. Duane dropped out of high school and prodded Gregg to do the same. Gregg wasn't sure yet—he thought maybe he wanted to be a dentist. He graduated from Seabreeze, got accepted to a college in Louisiana. He agreed to give Duane a year.

The Allmans left Florida in the late 1960s, first for St. Louis, then Hollywood, where they signed with Liberty Records, a bum contract that kept them marooned in California for a while. Eventually, Duane wiggled out of the deal and took off for Muscle Shoals. He'd started messing around with a slide by then, running a Coricidin cold medicine bottle up and down the neck of his guitar. Rick Hall, owner of FAME Studios, said that Duane's playing around this time "smelled like it came out of the bottom of the Tennessee River."

Hall hired him as a session guy. One of his first jobs was backing up Wilson Pickett on a screaming cover of "Hey Jude." There's a photo of Pickett and Duane working together in the studio that day. Duane is grinning under a bushy mustache. He was just twenty-two. I can't tell if Pickett is laughing or singing—his head is thrown way back—but he looks beautiful sitting next to Duane. The track is worth seeking out; Duane does some wild soloing during the coda. The na-na-nas are mercifully low in the mix. I wonder, sometimes, what Duane thought of the McCartney lyric "For well you know that it's a fool / Who plays it cool"—if it made sense to him, if it resonated in a big way, as I sometimes suspect it might've. Pickett keeps hollering his face off, like some exotic bird.

For whatever it's worth, Eric Clapton named Duane's part at the end of "Hey Jude" his favorite guitar solo of all time. Clapton collaborated with Duane about two years later at a Derek and the Dominos session in Miami, recording "Layla," a track about Clapton's unrequited love for George Harrison's wife, Pattie Boyd. Allman's riff is celestial—it floats the whole song. "When you listen to that album, you notice that every time Clapton takes a solo and then Duane takes one and then Clapton comes back in, it seems like he has a hard time playing, like he's had his mind blown," Duane's old friend, the guitarist Jim Shepley, told the journalist Jas Obrecht in 1982. "I really think Duane messed his mind up." Duane doesn't seem to be affected by the desperation of Clapton's love for Boyd, only by how miraculous it was. (Clapton and Boyd eventually married.)

Phil Walden, who had managed Otis Redding up until his death in December of 1967, bought out Duane's contract with Hall for \$10,000. He wanted Duane to get a band together to anchor a new label, Capricorn Records. Walden, then only twenty-nine years old, had already been present for a few too many transmutations for his work as a businessman to feel purely serendipitous. He was engineering things, con-

necting loose wires: in 1962, when Walden was managing a young guitarist named Johnny Jenkins, he left Jenkins and Otis Redding alone in the Stax studio for forty-odd minutes. They recorded a single, “These Arms of Mine,” one of the sweetest, hungriest implorations ever put to tape: “These arms of mine / They are yearning, yearning from wanting you / And if you / Would let them hold you / Oh, how grateful I will be,” Redding sings. Jenkins plays a loping little guitar figure. The 45 eventually sold more than 800,000 copies.

Walden lined up a distribution deal with Atlantic while Duane teamed up with a drummer named Jaimoe (né Johnnie Lee Johnson); the guitarist Dickey Betts; another drummer, Butch Trucks; and the bassist Berry Oakley. He called up Gregg in Los Angeles, told him to get back east, fast. And in the spring of 1969, a six-piece Allman Brothers Band played their first gig, in Jacksonville, Florida, at a club called the Jacksonville Armory. Gregg had been home for just four days. Duane was wearing some kind of fringed vest onstage that night. There was a sense that something was happening.

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Driving north from Tallahassee on Interstate 75, approaching Perry, Georgia, en route to Macon, I spotted a giant billboard featuring the word SECEDE, with LEAGUE OF THE SOUTH written below it in slightly smaller lettering. What it actually said was #SECEDE, the League of the South being, apparently, a Web-savvy operation. After I checked into my motor lodge, I carried a cold can of ginger ale and a nip of bourbon to the edge of the pool, arranged myself on a lounge chair, and opened my laptop.

The League of the South’s motto is “Survival, Well-Being, and Independence of the Southern People.” They are a radical neo-Confederate organization presently advocating, in 2015, for a second Southern secession, in which a sovereign South will be governed by a clump of “Anglo-Celtic” elites—men and women who “are not content to sit by and allow their land, liberty, and culture be destroyed by an alien regime and ideology.” It’s outlier extremism rooted in unapologetically racist notions. It is also the sort of dogma that is often and oddly associated with Southern rock, the genre that the Allman Brothers Band inadvertently founded in 1969, and which was quickly taken up by bands like Lynyrd Skynyrd, the Marshall Tucker Band, Molly Hatchet, and Charlie Daniels.

Few mythologies are quite as elaborate and

enduring—as generous and as loathsome—as the folklore related to the American Southeast. All that kudzu and *Gone with the Wind* and sweet tea and endless anguished visionaries: it means something to people, casts a certain kind of spell. But those sorts of fascinations don’t often develop without something wretched very close.

Like most musical genres, Southern rock itself is strange to define—it is, at its simplest, a blues-based, r&b-influenced, heavily guitar-driven strain of rock music. But the related iconography is easy, familiar: Confederate flag, pickup truck, long, stringy hair, distaste for outsiders. What is particularly confounding about these associations—and they are so odious—is that Southern rock was built on interracial collaborations, and I don’t just mean in the expansive sense, in the way that all American popular music was in fact seeded by the blues, but in the actual sense, in that one of the founding members of the Allman Brothers, Jaimoe, is black. Duane and Gregg grew up listening to soul and r&b and blues records; Gregg has talked about pedaling his bicycle across the tracks—literally—to buy two-dollar LPs from a convenience store in a black neighborhood, toting home albums by B.B. King, Howlin’ Wolf, James Brown, Sonny Boy Williamson.

The band relocated to Macon in the spring of 1969. Walden, a Georgia native, wanted to establish Capricorn there and asked the band to come up from Florida. Since graduating from Mercer University in 1962, Walden had been booking or managing an impressive roster of r&b performers: Clarence Carter, Arthur Conley, Al Green, Percy Sledge, Jenkins, Redding. He had grown up in rural Georgia, and was taken, at an early age, with black musicians, whom he routinely booked for white parties. Capricorn was built on the notion of symbiosis, dissolving the membranes between genres, races, histories. “I think I quickly earned this reputation as this little white boy who loves black music,” Walden later told his niece, Jessica. “I was just infatuated by it. I didn’t listen to anything else. I sort of missed that whole Presley thing. To me, the greatest rock & roll singer of all time, and the one who still possesses the truest, purest rock & roll voice is Little Richard. That is where rock & roll is from. The white performers tapped into what marvelously talented black performers had created.”

Otis Redding’s sudden death via plane crash devastated Walden, knocked him out for a while. But now, working with Jerry Wexler, Frank Fenter, and his brother Alan, Walden was help-

ing Capricorn Records find its legs, first as a series in conjunction with Atlantic and ATCO, and then as its own boutique enterprise. Capricorn would soon become synonymous with Southern rock—with the swampy, rollicking sound built in Macon.

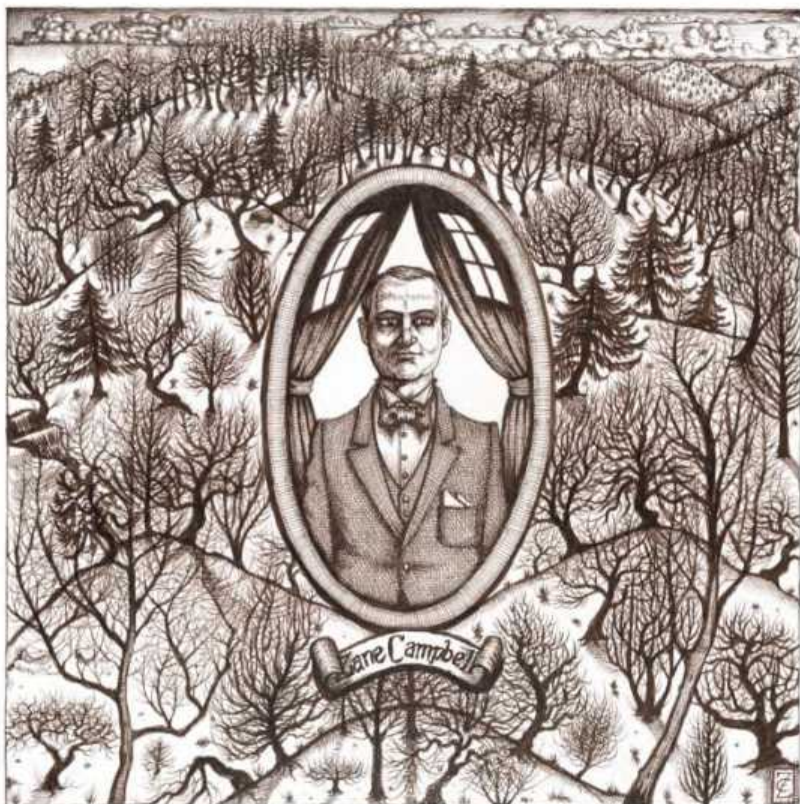
The Allman Brothers Band moved into an apartment at 309 College Street, known more colloquially as the Hippie Crash Pad. The living room was lined with end-to-end mattresses. There was a Coke machine stocked with Pabst Blue Ribbon. The band members were taking all their meals at H&H Soul Food—Mama Louise Hudson, the chef and proprietor, was an early and inadvertent patron, feeding them on credit—and chasing each repast with fistfuls of psychedelic mushrooms.

Macon itself wasn’t sure what to make of all these goings-on. An interracial band of longhairs in the Deep South in the late 1960s—it was heavy. It had only been about thirteen months since Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. Thirty-three school districts in Mississippi still hadn’t been desegregated. A gang of penurious bohemians palling around with a black man attracted notice, made people nervous. Nowadays, Sly and the Family Stone receives (and deserves) credit for being the first major integrated American rock band (and they were also multi-gender), but the Allman Brothers Band was right behind them. Gregg Allman spent his free time playing craps in the back of a black barbershop. They were, to borrow the parlance of the day, liberated.

Throughout their tenure, the Allmans remained loyal to the South, insisted upon it. The first time they played up north was in 1969, at a club called the Boston Tea Party. They were opening for the Velvet Underground for two nights, two sold-out crowds. It seems like an incongruous pairing, and by all accounts it was—this would’ve been “Pale Blue Eyes,” “Candy Says”—era Velvets, Lou Reed singing grim little couplets in his most subdued voice, with the kind of icy disaffection that comes so effortlessly to New Yorkers (and especially to Lou Reed). Imagine, for a second, that sound juxtaposed with Gregg’s warm, mischievous take on “One Way Out,” the Sonny Boy Williamson wailer the band had taken to covering. It’s a cagey song, but the live version the band recorded a couple years later—for 1972’s *Eat a Peach*—is one of the least cynical performances of anything, ever. And if they played it like that?

The band released its self-titled debut in late 1969. The album didn’t sell very well—around 33,000 copies. Butch Trucks later told the writer





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Featured on Dust To Digital's *Ola Belle Reed And Southern Mountain Music On The Mason-Dixon Line*



Alan Paul that they didn't care much about sales, and especially didn't care about changing, regardless of blowback from the industry. "They thought a bunch of Southern guys just standing there playing extended musical jams was absurd," Trucks told Paul. "They wanted Gregg out from behind the organ, jumping around with a salami in his pants."

The interior gatefold cover of *The Allman Brothers Band* features a grainy photograph of the band, naked, seated in a shaded woodland creek. Actually, Butch Trucks is standing up. He is wearing an exceptionally large hat. Berry Oakley's coiffure is blocking his business, barely.

Gregg didn't consider himself much of a singer, or not at first. I've come to find his performance on "Whipping Post" miraculous. It's not a self-pitying song, but it is resigned: "My friends tell me / That I've been such a fool / I have to stand by and take it, baby / All for loving you," he sings. It's a song specifically about taking it—receiving the punch, absorbing all the blows you deserve and a whole bunch you probably don't—but it is also about reckoning with the fallout of those wounds, with accepting how they linger. Sometimes, the song suggests, we are all wound. It becomes hard, in those moments, to find an unmangled part of yourself. That gruff, sprained-sounding baritone. It's as if he were coerced into admitting his own sadness, like that moment a person sorta snaps, hollers: "Yes, I am *upset*." He wrote the lyrics by rubbing burnt matches onto an ironing board cover in the middle of the night. "Good Lord, I feel like I'm dying."

If you compare those vocals to the way he sings on, say, "Melissa," from *Eat a Peach*, you can hear how he eventually learned to control and very nearly defang his voice. Somehow, between 1969 and 1972, he alleviated himself of something. Which is remarkable, considering that, by then, Gregg had lost both his brother and his father in horrifying, gruesome incidents. I like to think it was Duane who'd goaded him into singing the other way, yielding that strange fraternal muscle, the power brothers have over each other. Duane had made him give something up that he hadn't wanted to, and now Gregg was taking it back, closing the vault. That earlier voice, it was for Duane alone.

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By 1970, the Allmans had figured out they worked best as a live act: the music squirmed, needed air and room to wander. That year, the band released a follow-up LP,

*Idlewild South*, and scheduled a 300-something-date tour. In a review of the album for *Rolling Stone*, the rock critic Ed Leimbacher said the Allmans were playing “briefer, tighter, less ‘heavy’ numbers this time around,” and compared them, several times, to Santana.

*Idlewild South* is, in its way, a more controlled record than their debut, but there is still a specific rowdiness to it, an elasticity. It is extraordinarily loose-limbed. To this day, “Midnight Rider,” a song Gregg cowrote with Kim Payne, one of the band’s roadies, feels like a kind of apotheosis of Southern rock—if not its precise genesis—in both spirit and form. All the elements are there, stacked up: Duane’s balmy, supple guitars, that insistent groove, those wary, get-me-out-of-here lyrics. The Allmans were a band preoccupied by motion. “The road goes on forever,” Gregg sings. “But I’m not gonna let ‘em catch me, no.” Legend has it that Gregg and Payne broke into Capricorn Studios in the middle of the night to record a demo of the song. It’s like they had to grab it before it ran off.

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Motion sustained and also undid the Allman Brothers Band. In 1971, when Duane was twenty-four years old, he crashed his Harley-Davidson Sportster while trying to avoid a flatbed lumber truck at the intersection of Hillcrest Avenue and Bartlett Street in Macon. He’d just left Linwood-Bryant Hospital in Buffalo, a rehab facility where he’d been attempting—alongside Berry Oakley and two of the band’s roadies, Payne and Red Dog Campbell—to kick a fairly robust heroin habit. According to Alan Paul, Gregg was scheduled to check in, too, but split at the last minute to white-knuckle it on his own.

Duane was alive when they put him in an ambulance but died a few hours later, in surgery. The Allman Brothers Band played at the funeral, with Duane’s guitar propped up where he used to stand. His friends placed talismans in the casket, provisions for the other side: a silver dollar, a throwing knife, two joints, a lighter, and his favorite ring, a silver snake that coiled around his finger and had two chunks of turquoise for eyes. He’s buried in Rose Hill Cemetery in Macon. The band used to hang out there, writing songs, getting stoned. When I visited the grave, just before dusk, it was cool, misty, verdant. There’s a fence up around it now, paid for by fans who grew concerned about the ongoing desecration of the site. Previously, bits of the tombstone had been stolen, defaced. According to local

lore, people had often been caught engaging in sexual congress there. It’s also been said that a couple of particularly frenzied acolytes once dug a tunnel, trying to snatch the body.

There is a famous picture of Duane, taken earlier in 1971, performing at the Fillmore East. The band was playing the songs that would eventually comprise their breakthrough record, *At Fillmore East*, which had only been out for a little more than three months when Duane died (*Rolling Stone* called it “the finest live rock performance ever committed to vinyl”). He is wearing a long-sleeved henley shirt in an oceanic blue. The bottom button appears to be missing, revealing a triangle of rosy chest-flesh. His hair—shoulder-length, center-parted, and strawberry blond—is limp with sweat, clinging to his forehead like a pair of wet jeans. His eyes are squeezed shut and his mouth is ajar, gaped. His hands are on his guitar.

It is not the most flattering photograph, to be frank, although he made that face a lot, so it is also not anomalous. Something about his comportment here sort of resembles a catfish, glugging away at the bottom of a brackish pond. But there is another thing communicated in his expression, in the way his mouth is hanging open, as if it were unhinged at the jaw. It’s the kind of look you sometimes see on the faces of people undergoing a faith healing. It’s as if major things were coming in and going out.

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“You get real wicked after somebody dies, and you get pissed off,” Gregg writes in his autobiography, *My Cross to Bear*. He reflects gently on the process of healing, of reorienting yourself around an absence: “It takes some time, and probably a few glasses of spirits.”

Interestingly, Duane’s death doesn’t take up too much space in Gregg’s book, which was published to acclaim in 2012. Gregg recognizes that grief changes shape, but it doesn’t leave you, or not really. There isn’t all that much to say about it after a while. “Not that I got over it—I still ain’t gotten over it,” he writes. “I don’t know what getting over it means, really.”

By all accounts, Berry Oakley changed after Duane’s accident. “The truth is that Berry Oakley’s life ended when my brother’s life did. Never have I seen a man collapse like that,” Gregg writes. Oakley started drinking like someone who did not much care for being alive: a case of beer every morning, early. A bottle of Jack Daniel’s by mid-afternoon. He was often too

fucked up to play bass. A year after Duane’s death, Oakley drove his own motorcycle into the side of a bus three blocks away from the crash site. Some people think he did it on purpose. He was wasted. He refused to get into an ambulance. He went back to the house and sat around and had a brain hemorrhage and died.

The band released *Eat a Peach*, its third studio record, in the winter of 1972. It was gold by the time it shipped and debuted on the Billboard Top 10. Dickey Betts capably plays what would have been Duane’s parts. The album opens with one of my favorite Allman Brothers songs, “Ain’t Wastin’ Time No More,” which Gregg wrote on a one-hundred-ten-year-old Steinway piano, and which features this lovely little vocal move on the chorus, where Gregg sings “Time goes by like hurricanes / And faster things,” only he makes the words rhyme, lets them extend and dissipate, lets them disappear elegantly, like smoke rings in the night. It barely happens, but you notice it.

Oakley, who was alive for most of the recording, was not alive for the accolades, or the influx of cash. Phil Walden started piloting a white 1965 Silver Cloud Rolls-Royce around Macon. Capricorn was taking off. Soon they’d be releasing records by Marshall Tucker, James Montgomery, Elvin Bishop, Bobby Whitlock. The band toured and toured. The Allmans released a follow-up, *Brothers and Sisters*, in the summer of 1973. The record made it to No. 1 on the pop chart, due in part to the success of “Ramblin’ Man,” a major-key paean to eschewing responsibility (it was written by Betts, and inspired by the Hank Williams jam of the same name).

“Ramblin’ Man” enjoyed a long and somewhat curious stint as an AM radio hit, a small coup for a rock band in the early 1970s. It’s a buoyant, carefree song, the kind of thing that sounds good at a cookout while you are squirting mustard onto a hot dog, but terrible later on, in your bedroom. The band started jetting around on a customized Boeing 720B—the same plane commandeered by Led Zeppelin and the Stones—and doing spectacular amounts of drugs. (They were briefly joined on that tour by an adolescent *Rolling Stone* reporter named Cameron Crowe, who later mined their road shenanigans for both a magazine story and his film *Almost Famous*.)

They made a bunch of shitty records after that. Gregg started dating Cher (“I’m sorry, but she’s not a very good singer,” he later wrote of the union). There were a lot of mediocre side projects. By the late 1970s, the band was



done. Animosity was high; people were broke, paranoid. Walden himself was becoming an increasingly contentious figure in the manner of all great rock managers and impresarios, like anyone who ends up with a mercenary stake in the production and dissemination of an art that is not entirely his own. His legacy is still regarded with equal parts wariness and reverence (he died, in 2006, of cancer). He is often credited, fairly or not, with helping Jimmy Carter get elected president in 1976, throwing the full Southern rock gentry behind Carter's bid, hosting benefits, concerts, events. Eventually, it was revealed that Phil Walden owed a lot of people a lot of money. Capricorn went bankrupt.

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In 2014, the old Capricorn Records building was decreed uninhabitable by the city of Macon, although it somehow avoided timely demolition. The whole block has recently been purchased and the community apparently has designs on rehabilitation, on turning the space into a new set of lofts or offices. Otis Redding set up business there in

the late 1960s—you can see the exterior of the building in the video for “Tramp,” the one where he’s wearing that terrific green suit and counting cash on the street. For now, the building’s concealed behind a temporary black wall. From afar, the barrier looks like one of those opaque bands blocking out sex organs on the covers of nudie magazines. If you stand close enough and sort of jump up and down in front of it—or, emboldened, perhaps you attempt to scale it, maybe getting yourself close enough to the top to snap a cell phone photo, one eye on the sheriff’s car idling across the street—you can still make out where the old letters hung, the ones that spelled out CAPRICORN. After my visit, I drove to a bar downtown, ordered a bourbon and soda, and listened, no joke, to “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” on the house stereo. I thought about what had been made there, in Macon.

I still don’t know how to write about this without sounding hysterical, but there’s something in those early records that seems to presage tragedy. I keep listening for it now, trying to parse it out, name it: certain things run so hot that dissolution of a sort seems inevitable. All the great loves work that way. It’s so present in

Duane’s guitar playing—a flood, like the valves were too open, like too much of him was getting in. And his bandmates, his little brother: how do you lose like that and keep going? And not only keep going, but thrive, find a way to make songs that are joyful, exultant?

It’s hard, these days, in Macon, to feel the sense of possibility that must have been present there in the late 1960s—a belief that the future might transcend the past, that, as Lou Reed sang, “what comes is better than what came before.” The Allmans found it, and held it, at least for a short while.

The band eventually got back together, in the eighties. In the 1990s, they released a string of fair-to-unremarkable albums. They played some shows that were considered epic—perfect—and only officially retired from the road in late 2014. The jam-band preoccupation of the early 1990s had helped them commercially. Young people suddenly had stamina for noodling. Personally, I recall some of those shows feeling downright transcendent. They’d put off the studio years before that, although they were never really a studio band to begin with. Their music lived in the air, in that Florida-Georgia haze. You had to feel it on your skin. 🐦

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Max Papart, *Man of Venus*, 1983



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### On Ancient Wings: THE SANDHILL CRANES OF NORTH AMERICA

This exhibition uses traditional film photography by presenting 38 color photographs from the award-winning book by internationally known conservation photographer Michael Forsberg. Whooping cranes, the species found in Louisiana, were added to the endangered species list in 1967. This led to the development of an experimental population at the White Lake Wetlands Conservation Area in 2011. *On Ancient Wings* serves to highlight the cranes as well as the work to preserve this species in Louisiana and other locations throughout the country. Nature is a prominent theme in Southern art and photography, as well as in Alexandria Museum of Art's collection.



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experiences that showcase the region's rich culture and outdoor adventures in over 50 communities.

"The people who most enjoyed the first Mountains of Music Homecoming were looking to connect with a unique culture," said Crooked Road executive director Jack Hinshelwood. "It's one thing to hear an incredible concert of traditional music, but couple that with a day enjoying distinctive cultural experiences, breathtaking scenery, local flavors of dining and shopping, and you have a full Homecoming experience."

The intimate marquee concerts feature the region's finest tradition bearers as well as internationally known artists like last year's Doyle Lawson, Lonesome River Band, and many others. Concerts for 2016 include a landmark gathering of Southwest Virginia Bluegrass all-stars led by



Lonesome River Band's Sammy Shelor on banjo.

"Visitors love the sense of discovery here, whether it's discovering what's around the next bend of The Crooked Road, or discovering a local fiddler that can 'fiddle all the bugs off a sweet-potato vine,' to quote poet Stephen Vincent Benet," said Hinshelwood.

The cultural experiences will again be a major component of the 2016 Homecoming and will build on 2015 experiences such as the community meals, guitar-making demonstrations, wine and beer tastings, canoe floats, jam sessions, and many more entertaining offerings.

*The 2016 Mountains of Music Homecoming is a chance to not just visit a unique place and culture, but to become part of it. For more information visit [www.mtnsofmusic.com](http://www.mtnsofmusic.com).*







## In Days of Woe

BY  
BILL DAWERS

Last winter, the metal band Black Tusk went on a six-week tour of Europe, where they’ve established a strong following over the past decade. As most any band would today, they shared a candid visual diary on social media. But the trio’s followers on Facebook and Instagram (there are more than 54,000 of them) weren’t just seeing the expected performance photos, landscape shots, party pics, and show promos. Black Tusk had a mission abroad, which they christened #ripathon.

In one photo, guitarist Andrew Fidler stands on the deck of a ship crossing the English Channel, his face obscured by his long hair, his right arm extended over the water, a bottle barely visible in his hand. #ripathon. In another, he

crouches on a stone barrier beside the River Clyde in Glasgow, while drummer James May holds a small purple flower above him. Similar images were shared from quiet corners across the continent—along the Elbe and the Danube, beside a canal in Amsterdam, a creek in London, on the Latvian shore of the Baltic Sea, in the Sedlec Ossuary in the Czech Republic.

By the time Black Tusk returned home to Savannah, Georgia, in March, their load was a little lighter: they’d left ashes of their bassist, Athon, in every place they’d gone.

On the evening of November 7, 2014, Jonathan Athon and his girlfriend, Emily, were heading south on Price Street in Savannah’s Historic District when an eighty-five-year-old driver in an SUV ran a STOP sign, intercepting Athon’s Harley-Davidson. The two were wearing helmets, and Emily eventually recovered, but Athon—everyone called him by his last name—suffered irreparable brain damage and was removed from life support two days later. He was thirty-two. His band had just finished recording their fifth album, and they were excited about an upcoming European tour with Black Label Society.

The news of Athon’s sudden passing spread rapidly around the world. The metal press, major music publications, and even mainstream news media picked it up. Friends and musi-

cians who had known Athon posted tributes on social media.

“He had an insatiable appetite to fix things, an uncompromising honesty, and an enviable ambition to learn new skills,” wrote John Dyer Baizley of Baroness, another band forged in the Savannah metal scene. “He was a unique person to say the least, hardworking till the end, and with a lust for life that sometimes left us all spinning.”

Susanne Guest Warnekros, the owner of the Jinx, the Savannah bar that nurtured Black Tusk and other metal acts, wrote: “He wasn’t just a badass when he was onstage, he was also a badass at manufacturing and fixing every single thing this bar ever needed, with no complaints and often did these things not because he was asked to, but because he noticed it needed to be done. There’s not one inch of this bar that you can put your eyes on that he hasn’t had a part in making.”

When Black Tusk formed in 2005, Athon was a punk guitarist with no experience on bass. “Since it was Athon, he taught himself how to play bass in fucking a month,” James May told me. “He taught himself how to do everything, man. In a very short period of time, and got good at it. He was just that type of person.”

Athon was known around town as a big-hearted doer—a generous carpenter and handyman who was always willing to help



his friends. His absence has been deeply felt. My first conversations with him were at a hunting lodge in the woods along a marsh south of Savannah. Owned by an alligator trapper whose daughter is married to a musician, the property was regularly used for casual potlucks and cookouts. Athon would generally man the barbecue, which he had made out of an oil drum. With his long red beard and constant smile, Athon the grill master was the flip side of the onstage musician, who wielded his bass like a medieval mace.

Some of us in the city's small music community wondered if the metal scene, let alone the band, would survive without Athon, who seemed to be at the center of so many crucial projects—musical, construction, and otherwise. But less than a month after the wreck, Black Tusk announced that they would honor their commitment to the European tour that had been scheduled before Athon's death. Corey Barhorst, the former bass player for Kylesa, one of the first bands to be identified with Savannah metal, would go in his place.

Within the band, there was never a question about whether Black Tusk would keep on. "The band at this point is bigger than the three of us,"

Andrew told me in July. We were hanging out with Corey and James in front of the auto repair business on Montgomery Street where they practice after hours. "The band is its own fucking entity," Andrew added. "It's Black Tusk."

#ripathon continued throughout the year as the band, with Barhorst now a permanent member, toured extensively across the United States and again in Europe. Jonathan Athon's remains were deposited in the Mississippi River in Memphis, the Ohio in Cincinnati, Lake Pontchartrain, and Buckingham Fountain in Chicago's Grant Park. Relapse Records, which first signed Black Tusk in 2009, has extended their contract, and a new album—the last recordings on which Athon appears—is scheduled for release in early 2016.

Corey said, "Athon would have been pissed off to see people moping around."

A port city that has seen many waves of immigration over the years, Savannah has always been a creative enclave. I've been covering music here for fifteen years. Today, it's common to see metalheads at country shows or punks supporting hip-hop, and Athon seemed to know everyone. A week after the wreck, friends and family

gathered in Franklin Square to share memories and to grieve. There was a makeshift memorial on one of the benches, while Ghost Town Tattoo across the street continued its fund-raiser in Athon's honor. The shop eventually completed eighty-nine memorial tattoos, with the proceeds going to medical expenses for Athon's girlfriend and for two of his friends: the musicians Jason Statts, who was paralyzed in a random street shooting in 2008, and Keith Kozel, who is battling a degenerative kidney disease.

Afterward, some of Athon's closer friends convened for a sad night a few blocks away at the Jinx. Many of them had been key players in the Savannah metal scene from the beginning, when it grew out of underground punk of the eighties and nineties. "Back then in Savannah, things were so under the radar," Phillip Cope later told me. "You could get away with a lot without even being noticed." When Cope's band, Kylesa, and Baroness gained national attention under the label "sludge metal," Savannah earned a reputation as one of the genre's hubs. But most of the artists assembled under that banner resisted definition, including Black Tusk. "It was just punks getting into heavier stuff," Cope said. Still, as the local bands were embraced by metal fans around the world, their relentless touring left a void at home. "By the time people outside Savannah discovered the scene in Savannah, the scene was already over." In one of Black Tusk's best-known songs, "Truth Untold," from their 2013 album *Tend No Wounds*, Athon sang: "The arrival of times unworthy behold the future in days of woe shadows shall rise."

There are still metal bands in Savannah, but lately the scene has been eclipsed by other genres: old-school punk, Americana, and various stripes of indie rock. In 2013, Cope and his Kylesa bandmates Laura Pleasants and Carl McGinley II founded Retro Futurist Records, which has released music by several newer bands like the garage rock duo Wet Socks, the punk act Crazy Bag Lady, and the psych rock band Niche. There is some fast music there, and some heavy music, too, but none of those are metal acts.

"It's natural for things to evolve and change," Cope told me. "Moving on is just kind of our thing."


Baroness is now based in Philadelphia and rarely books gigs in Savannah. Black Tusk played only two hometown shows in 2015, but Andrew, James, and Corey still routinely come out to the Jinx, and Athon never seems far away. A painted portrait of him and his dog, Cutter, hangs above the bar's front door. 🐕

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Michael Meads, *Drunken Punchinello's in Love*, 2008, sumi ink on paper, Collection of the Artist

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# Country Notes by Country Folks

BY  
REGINA N. BRADLEY

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I'm from Albany, Georgia. We're in the southwest corner of the state. About a three-and-a-half-hour ride south from Atlanta. Ninety miles north of Tallahassee. Wedged between leaning cornstalks, flat farmlands, and plantations. W.E.B. Du Bois came down for a visit once. Seemingly unimpressed, he in his Northeast urban snooty candor declared black Albanians "sturdy, uncouth country folk, good-natured and simple, talkative to a degree, and . . . far more silent and brooding." When the July sun, a silent terror in its own right, tried to beat down on him, Du Bois reported it to be "a sort of dull, determined heat that seems quite independent of the sun." For the record, southwest Georgia heat whoops ass. It's dense and wet and sticks to skin like melted glue.

After Du Bois's visit in those early years of the nineteen hundreds, Albany black folks pushed forward in their own unbothered way. Like many rural places across the South, a callus of racial tension and segregation hardened, but eventually black folks buzzed with keywords like "protest," "desegregation," and "Martin Luther 'the' King Jr." Local leaders like W. G. Anderson, Slater King, and Marion S. Page encouraged blacks to fight for their civil rights, and in the early 1960s Albany's freedom movement rose on a national scale. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee representatives traveled to Albany to set up voter registration drives. Students who attended the historically black Albany State College (now University) participated in, and were jailed for participating in, sit-ins and marches. Albany's young folks used their own talents to protest, including Bernice Johnson Reagon and Rutha Mae Harris, who, along with SNCC representatives Charles Neblett and Cordell Reagon, formed the Freedom Singers. When they were arrested in Albany, the group "sang across the cells, trying to keep our spirits up," Harris once told

my Sunday school class during a Black History Month program.

White folks didn't like any of it, and they threatened physical and economic violence. "They would fire anybody they found out was part of the movement," my grandparents told me. "We wanted change but had to take care of our families and make money." Black folks had to keep the momentum going behind the scenes.

Albany State, under threat of losing funding, expelled students who protested. Morale started slipping, so movement leaders called in Martin Luther King Jr., who came to Albany in 1961, marched, preached, and was jailed. Although King and his people refused to post bail, someone anonymously paid for it and they were released. According to folks whispering around town, then-police chief Laurie Pritchett had set

up King's bail to be paid, a tactic he used to lower protesters' morale and undermine movement efforts. Pritchett proved a formidable foe, jailing protesters in Albany and across southwest Georgia, a region as hostile to black freedom as any. Perhaps King got humbled a bit by the realization that rural Southern black folks' blues and struggles weren't like his native Atlanta. His failure to rectify Albany's race relations in a fell swoop forced King to understand that there was no such thing as a successful cookie-cutter movement for redeeming black folks' civil rights.

Like that July sun that beat down on Du Bois's back, Albany continued to protest, a slow burn independent of the national movement. But momentum and enthusiasm died down after 1964, until all that was left were murmurs during Black History Month programs, family







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reunions, and Sunday church services. For a long time, Albany's status as a civil rights battleground remained deeply attached to local lore.

I grew up in post-civil rights Albany. I was a member of the generation of black children obligated to participate in pageants and essay contests dedicated to preserving the legacy of the folks who fought for the rights I enjoyed daily. Some of the former student protesters were teachers at my high school, like the Reverend Dr. Janie Rambeau, who marched and was expelled from Albany State.

I lived with my grandparents on the south side of Dougherty County on Hardup Road. There were plantations on either side of our house. Rows of corn and melons flanked our back yard—as a little girl I wondered if the melons were green balloons waiting to be popped. Flying cockroaches would hang from the tips of low-hanging tree branches, and kamikaze dove into your face if you walked underneath them. Lime perfumed the air early in the morning and late at night. The quiet on Hardup Road was thick and stuffed my ears. A random mooing cow or car kickback was welcome. There was very little to do but watch satellite television, listen to music, and walk the road. We literally lived in “the field.”

Music kept me sane. The blues was for Saturday morning cleanups with Paw Paw and Nana Boo before going to Albany State football games at Hugh Mills Stadium. Gospel Cavalcade was for Sunday rides to church. But hip-hop was mine, for all occasions.

My bedroom was always piled with homemade mixtapes I pulled from the radio. My first mixtape was special because it marked my move in 1998 from northern Virginia to the Dirty South—I still remember how LL Cool J's verse on the remix of Montell Jordan's “Let's Ride” abruptly shifted into Three 6 Mafia's “Tear Da Club Up '97.” Mixtapes were painstaking work: listening to the radio for hours to songs I didn't like, finally hearing the song I'd been waiting for, starting at the right place on the tape, and stopping the recording before commercials or another song came on.

Some songs, like Atlanta-based Goodie Mob's “Black Ice,” made it on every mixtape I ripped. Big Gipp's opening lines—“Now you know and I know / I done bumped every hole in the wall, y'all”—could be read as a double entendre for being knocked around by life and also getting high. This song invoked my uncertainty about school and the risks of moving forward without a clear vision of what I was

doing, anxieties that conflicted with advice from my grandparents, who encouraged me to go on faith, perched on the sacrificial shoulders of black folks before me.

Mixtapes were currency at Albany-area high schools, bartered across cafeteria tables, under school desks, through slits of car windows, and out of trunks. They featured Albany and surrounding-area hip-hop acts like Field Mob, Suthern Klick, THER.I.P.Y., Ness Lee, Ole-E, D.R.U., and Big Nod, who spun stories of growing up in the rural South. Southern hip-hop made room for a new generation of young black folks to speak their truths.

There's a distinction between urban and rural in Southern hip-hop, and in Georgia this difference was especially prominent during the mid- to late 1990s. Atlanta rappers, especially OutKast, were at the time bearing a huge burden of outside criticism—the ideas from New York and California that Southerners were incapable of producing legitimate hip-hop music and culture. Atlanta was eventually able to successfully garner attention as a viable hip-hop hub and, through its brandishing, came to represent all of Georgia. Georgian rappers who hailed from rural hometowns, and also wanted legitimacy, switched their allegiances from the country to the more visible Atlanta in order to receive a shot at being commercially successful.

Field Mob, though, represented “the 'Bany.” While urban hip-hop ushered in an era of “bling” and hyper-materialism, the Albany-based duo trademarked their country-ness. Together, Shawn “Shawn Jay” Johnson and Darion “Smoke” Crawford refused to shy away from their country upbringing and poverty. Joining forces after battling at Monroe Comprehensive High School, Field Mob used their experiences of growing up poor and black to make country a serious Southern hip-hop trope, creating a brand of music that was especially janky and uncouth. Field Mob looked to the future, refusing to romanticize the post-civil rights South as the “mountaintop” fought for during the sixties. They recognized how slow living and slavery's rolling and residual effects still dominated lesser-developed parts of the rural South. Country black folks' experiences didn't easily situate within the urban version of hip-hop. “We [wanted] to be mascots for the country,” Shawn Jay once said in a radio interview.

Field Mob's 2000 debut, *613: Ashy to Classy*, shone Albany in a more contemporary light, as a city struggling with socioeconomic troubles not ameliorated by the civil rights movement. Their first single, “Project Dreamz,” became poor

and rural black folks' anthem—the song was in constant rotation on the local hip-hop stations, 96.3 WJIZ and the now-defunct HOT106.1. Composed of plucky guitar strings, percussion, and scratching synthesizers, with well-placed church hollers throughout the chorus, “Project Dreamz” presented a solemn view of growing up poor in rural Georgia. Across radio waves and school hallways people sung the song’s hook: “If you ever been broke put your hands up.” The punch lines were catchy and painful, conjuring images of drug abuse, soul food, and poverty (“have you ever bathed with soap the size of a Cert?”) that resonated with people outside of Georgia’s urban center. You could feel the power in these lines, listening as Smoke’s high and nasal voice complemented the octave dips in Shawn Jay’s gravelly delivery.

Field Mob was also aware of Albany’s status as a “ghost town” of the civil rights imagination, and their second album, *From tha Roota to the Toota*, recalls Albany’s racial tensions and history. “It’s Hell,” a song featuring fellow Albany rapper Ole-E, references slavery and slave masters. The use of vibrato in scripture, call-and-response, and the chorus in “All I Know” pulls from the backwoods Baptist sermonic tradition of redemption and “come as you are” rhetoric. The accompanying music video best illustrates it: rapper CeeLo, in traditional pastoral robes, raps from the pulpit while church members, wearing clothes ranging from “Sunday best” suits and dresses to street clothes (baggy jeans, short skirts, and polo shirts) wave hands in praise. But “Don’t Want No Problems” takes modern racial tension head on:

*I’m from the home of racist rednecks and  
Confederate flags  
You could strand them bussies, politicians,  
and drags  
Cotton pickin’, slave tradin’, and nigga  
lynchin’  
Lead to more oppression, me Cricket caught  
trigger pinchin’*

Shawn Jay’s flow is then interrupted by a cop’s Doppler siren before the group determines “he kept goin’,” and then Shawn Jay raps, despondently: “It’s like I got enemies. ‘Cause of my race they hate me.” The song ends with a final, futile appeal from Smoke—“I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired,” a recasting of Mississippi Freedom Fighter Fannie Lou Hamer’s now-famous sentiment. The line glides over the repeated coda of “Leave me alone.” This music couldn’t be more relevant if it were written tomorrow. 🍌

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## Tar Road

BY  
NICK NORWOOD

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Come June this brook runs soft,  
takes its lumps, before the family  
gets AC, your cheap bike busted,  
walking tar-heeled, skin-to-skin  
with a bruise-black two-laner hot  
and spongy underfoot. Everything  
existing, it seems like, on a one-  
to-one basis. You here, the sun there,  
the dark road. An oak, another oak.  
The deaf mute’s pitiful house.  
A shack, a shed, your uncle’s trailer.  
Up ahead, the creek, its drowned  
tires like rings of tar flash-cooled  
in the au lait water, crawdads  
to catch on cotton string, ease out  
of the brown ooze, haul home  
in a bucket, let stink on a step.  
Your feet reading road like Braille,  
the woman with a radio eyes  
you from her slack porch, porch-  
swinging in 4/4 time. Under-  
ground, a dark crude sea ailt  
against the earth’s axis, while  
at your back, a *twang-twaaaaang*  
of AM country steel guitar,  
then a crow cawing country blues.  
A *twang-twang*. A *twang-twaaaaang*.  
A road disappearing into woods.



The background is a complex, abstract collage. It features various mechanical and musical elements: a large circular dial at the top left, a rectangular panel with a grid pattern on the left, several circular components resembling speakers or lenses scattered throughout, and a large circular dial on the right. The color palette is dominated by blues, reds, and greys, with a textured, almost painterly quality. The overall composition suggests a fusion of technology, music, and art.

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## With All Their Heart and Soul

BY  
BRIAN POUST

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In his 1968 B-side track “I Got That Will,” Atlanta soul singer Hermon Hitson dreamed aloud of making it big in the music business, becoming a star, and having his name in lights. *You gonna know me*, he proclaimed exuberantly over a punchy, mid-tempo groove featuring a guitar riff based loosely on “Ninety-Nine and a Half (Won’t Do),” Wilson Pickett’s 1966 hit. *Pretty girls. Pretty clothes. Do you know? Dig it!*

Hermon’s dream was perfectly plausible in the 1960s, when the city was flush with black nightclubs like the Royal Peacock on Auburn Avenue, which hosted nearly every top r&b act of the day—stars like Solomon Burke, Ben E. King, and the Contours—who’d perform for packed houses, backed by a local band. In the city’s Sweet Auburn district, just east of downtown, the traveling r&b stars would find not just enthusiastic audiences, but well-appointed black-owned hotels and restaurants. Despite the Jim Crow laws of the era, Atlanta was a hub for black talent and entrepreneurship, and Sweet Auburn was home to many African-American businesses—from one of the nation’s first black-owned insurance companies to Soulville Records. Martin Luther King Jr. was born in the neighborhood, and both the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Julian Bond–led Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were based there. And as Bond recalled on a 2005 panel at the Atlanta History Center, it was common to move from meeting room to nightclub after important gatherings among civil rights leaders.

During Sweet Auburn’s heyday, a brotherhood of gifted guitar-playing soul singers, though largely unknown by a wide audience today, formed a loose collective. They wrote songs together, recorded them, encouraged one another, and competed fiercely, each believing in a coming personal glory that never came. Today, their records are coveted artifacts among deep soul collectors and DJs worldwide. Their stories can be accessed through their greatest songs.

Do you know? Dig it!

Heartbreak may be a cornerstone of memorable songwriting, but we all know there are different levels of pain. Take “Why Do Fools Fall in Love” by Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers, with its finger-snapping, danceable beat, or the lushly orchestrated David Ruffin hit, “My Whole World Ended (The Moment You Left Me).” They sound downright cheerful. On the other end of the spectrum is James Brown’s *Live at the Apollo* album, of which critic Douglas Wolk wrote: “He sings as if his lover leaving him would be the end of the world.” With all due



respect to the Godfather of Soul (and to Mr. Wolk), there's another soul song that sounds practically apocalyptic by comparison. And it belongs at the very top of the cadre of Atlanta soul classics—a recording imbued with drama, grit, and tortured pain, with vocals delivered as throat-shredding screams. At the beginning of “Bad Girl,” Lee Moses says he’s going to tell us about “something that happened to me long time ago.” Listening to the song, it’s hard to shake the feeling that he could have just as easily been dumped in the parking lot of the recording studio.

Lee Moses was born in 1941, and he grew up in Mechanicsville, a neighborhood in southwest Atlanta. According to Rickey Andrews, a singer and founding member of Atlanta band the Fabulous Denos, Lee dropped out of high school to pursue work as a musician. His break likely came while performing at the famed 81 Theatre on Decatur Street, near downtown. In the late fifties, local radio station WAOK sponsored Tuesday-night talent shows at the 81, and the winner would earn a spot playing at a club on a weekend night. Lee thrived in this arrangement—as Andrews says, “He could play anything!”—and he soon became one of

the most sought-after guitarists in town, fronting the Showstoppers, the house band at the Royal Peacock, the premier club on Auburn Avenue. Everybody wanted to play with Lee and capture his funky sound on their songs, but Moses wanted to release his own material. His first single was 1967’s “Diana (From N.Y.C.),” and later that year, he released two brilliantly arranged and performed instrumental covers: the Four Tops’ “Reach Out, I’ll Be There” backed by the Beatles’ “Day Tripper.” Popular today with DJs, this record did not suggest the powerful voice that would appear when Moses’s version of “Bad Girl” hit shops later in 1967.

“Bad Girl” was originally penned by Bobby Lee Fears in 1964 for the Fabulous Denos, which Fears formed inside the walls of Booker T. Washington High School in Ashby Heights, near Atlanta’s historically black West End district. The Denos recorded the cautionary tale of teenage heartbreak in Macon at the same studio where James Brown made his first hit, “Please Please Please.” The Denos chased success—performing across the country and in Canada—but Bobby had a difficult time managing a number of vices; he had a reputa-

tion for being quick-tempered and prone to emotional decision making. Back in Atlanta, as band member Arthur “Dino” Merriwether recalls, Fears sold the song rights to “Bad Girl” to Lee Moses for drug money. (Other friends of Fears acknowledged that the drug money scenario is plausible, but would not go so far as to confirm Merriwether’s assertion.) Moses, who had also attended Washington High, before dropping out, recorded “Bad Girl” for the New York-based Musicor label—transforming Fears’s naive breakup ballad into an earth-shattering confession of the moment you know it’s over but you can’t come to terms with the pain. Where the Fabulous Denos’ original take on “Bad Girl” is a rather straightforward doo-wop to r&b reading taken at an upbeat tempo, Lee slowed it down, intensifying the emotion, and screamed his way through the vocals. It sounds as though he’s actually crying as he sings about an older woman who everyone warned him would break his heart. He didn’t listen, and he paid the price. Fears was wiped from the credits on the 1967 single.

Despite radio play throughout the Southeast, “Bad Girl” did not chart. Following a handful of additional singles, Moses released a solo LP

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in 1971 called *Time and Place*. It was a commercial flop, though it went on to achieve vaunted status among rare-record collectors, and it's now available thanks to a 2007 reissue. Lee Moses never had a hit. He continued to gig in Atlanta until his death in 1997.

Many of Atlanta's conventional clubs closed at midnight, but visiting and resident musicians would congregate for jam sessions at private venues after their advertised gigs. These were the places where friendships were bonded, business transacted, and scores settled. After he came to Atlanta in 1963, on tour with his band the Rockin Tonics, at age nineteen, Hermon Hitson was active in this scene. He built a reputation in Sweet Auburn as a talented musician (not to mention a self-professed player in the city's healthy pimp culture). Nicknamed "Sweet Rose," he drove Cadillacs, wore fine clothes, and relished the party life.

In 1967, Hermon was hired to play one weekend at the Night Cap club on Bankhead Highway to fill in for Lee Moses, who was off to New York to record with producer Johnny Brantley, a smooth "Italian looking fella," as Hermon remembers (in fact, Brantley was African-American). When Lee returned to Atlanta, he met his temporary replacement, and the two musicians became fast friends. On Lee's recommendation, Brantley secured Hermon a contract with ATCO Records, where his first nationally released single was issued in March the next year. The A-side, "You Are Too Much for the Human Heart," was written by Lee Moses; the flip was one of Hermon's called "I Got That Will."

It didn't take long for "You Are Too Much for the Human Heart" to build traction on r&b radio along the East Coast. Meanwhile, Hermon was working hard in the clubs. On weekends, he often played from 8 P.M. until midnight at the Plantation in Midtown, then headed out to Mamie's Diner on Bankhead. By that hour, the front door at Mamie's would have already been locked, but downstairs the after-hours club would keep the party going until sunrise.

On a rainy Friday night in the spring of 1968, Hermon was taking a young woman home from Mamie's when he was attacked by two men who followed his car. During the confrontation, a knife fell to the ground, and Hermon picked it up and slashed one of his attackers so severely that the man died that night at the hospital. Hermon was arrested and charged with murder. Though he was later exonerated, radio stations

quit playing his record, nightclubs shied away from booking him, and Hermon was dropped by ATCO altogether, halting the full-length album he thought he had coming.

The subsequent years brought further troubles. Thanks to Brantley, Hermon managed to record a couple singles on Minit Records, released to little fanfare (or sales). In 1969, his girlfriend was murdered and he was briefly jailed again, then released before any charges were filed. His opportunities at stardom fading, he turned to cocaine and heroin until he was barely able to function. "Everybody goes to Hell," Hermon told me, of that era, "but everybody don't make it back."

Were it not for his friend James Shaw—better known as the Mighty Hannibal—Hermon might not have made it back, either. Hannibal grew up in Vine City, one of Atlanta's most impoverished neighborhoods, and had moved to Los Angeles in the late 1950s to pursue his recording career. In L.A., he became a pimp before converting to Islam and returning home. Hannibal stayed with his friend for thirty days straight to help him break his addiction. He worked Hermon through a cold-turkey detox and taught him about his faith. "Hannibal said that we weren't devil's food cake, and we weren't angel food cake either," Hermon remembers now. "That brought me to myself and after thirty days, I was cool." Hermon converted to Islam in 1971.

The Mighty Hannibal also wanted to put Hermon's artistry back on the map. When the after-hours clubs finally closed around 5 A.M., Hermon, Hannibal, and another friend, the guitarist Freddie Terrell, would head back to Freddie's house, put on a pot of coffee, and write songs together. The redemptive "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down" came out of their collaboration.

Early in 1972, Hannibal booked and paid for studio time at Cheshire Sound on Cheshire Bridge Road, recruiting Freddie's Blue Rhythm Band to back Hermon. "Ain't No Other Way" came from that session. From the very first note, the song jumps into a hard, vamping groove that announces itself with authority. There is no count-in, no introductory bars. Instead, the instruments come on at once: drums, horns, guitar, and bass. Throughout the song, Hermon sings: "I love you, yes I do now, baby, YOW! Sock it to me, with all my heart and soul." The only hint of a reprieve from the heavy funk onslaught is a simple seven-note bridge on the guitar that only makes you want the next verse more.

Hannibal and Hermon shopped the song to a number of labels but came up empty: by then, no one seemed prepared to take another chance on Hermon and his checkered past. He made the decision to self-release the record, and it was pressed on his own Sweet Rose label—a nod to his earlier days as a pimp, and the name he gave to his guitar.

Hermon's bond with his contemporaries was forged on the road with its meager monetary rewards. "A lot of people don't understand what we went through," he says. "You put all the miles on the car, pay all the musicians their cut, get a hotel and food night after night, and then try to explain to your woman why you don't have any money when you get home. It's hard, man." Lee, Hermon, and Freddie Terrell, in particular, shared a close camaraderie—the proof is on the records themselves, where writing credits like Hitson-Moses or Hitson-Terrell are common. They shared songs, too. ("I Got That Will" was recorded at different times by Hermon Hitson, Lee Moses, and the Mighty Hannibal.) At heart, these men wanted each other to succeed.

Before Moses became bandleader for the Showstoppers, the group's point man was Jay Floyd, a bassist who also played guitar for a local gospel group called the Southern Bells. That group included the thirteen-year-old Freddie Terrell, who learned guitar under the tutelage of Floyd. Within a few years, Freddie joined the Showstoppers, and not long after that he was hired by Wilson Pickett, who took him out on the road. When Freddie came home, in 1969, he was ready to put together his own group. The Blue Rhythm Band was born.

One night, they were playing a regular gig at Soul City, a large, integrated nightclub down the street from Cheshire Sound studio, when a couple of Capitol Records producers were in the audience scouting for talent. They approached Freddie between sets, and two weeks later he had a date to record at Atlanta's Master Sound on Spring Street, the preferred studio for Bill Lowery, a music-publishing mogul with ties all across the industry, including a distribution deal with Capitol Records. Capitol put out "You Had It Made" and "Why Not Me?" in January of 1970.

Freddie had written "You Had It Made" with Hermon during one of their early-morning sessions. While there is a recognizable sweetness in the sound, similar to the vocal groups from Philadelphia and Chicago of that time, the influence of drummer Eddie



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Maxey—with his hard-hitting funky style and rough-edged vocalizations—roots the song in the South. If Lee Moses's "Bad Girl" is the standard-bearer for an Atlanta sound, this single is a fine example of that sound three years later.

Like Jay Floyd, Lee had been an early mentor to Freddie and, as he had done for Hermon before, he introduced Freddie to his manager, Johnny Brantley, who agreed to use the Blue Rhythm Band on a Lionel Hampton album for Brunswick Records. The resulting *Them Changes* is a collection of hit songs of the period played in the soul idiom, with Hampton's jazz vibraphone overdubbed from a separate recording session in New York. As it turned out, the album didn't do much to boost Freddie's career, though the exposure had a positive effect on the band. Freddie is cautious and wistful in his remembrance of this period. Today, he is semiretired from music, playing his guitar primarily in church, though he still occasionally takes the stage with the Buckboard Express, Hermon's current r&b group. "A lot of the DJs worked the clubs as emcees in those days, so they knew all the musicians," Freddie recalls. Many local DJs began to play the Hampton record, so more people came out to the shows. In a city like Memphis or Chicago, where there was a healthier studio and record label presence, the Blue Rhythm Band might have been able to quickly get back into the studio and keep their momentum moving forward. Instead, they cracked under pressure, allowing ego and politics to eat away at the band from the inside. "Once you get something going," he remembers, "it goes to everyone's head. Everyone is a superstar." They split in 1971.

Today, there is little to be found of Atlanta's colorful r&b scene. The construction of three interstate freeways in the late 1960s permanently splintered many of the city's thriving black neighborhoods, which were further decimated by the construction of Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, the Georgia Dome, and Turner Field. Mercedes-Benz Stadium—future home of the Falcons—has cut off access to downtown Atlanta via Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard from the west side, which is predominantly populated by African Americans. You can still walk by the Royal Peacock on Auburn Avenue, with its vintage marquee, though the historic venue is merely a shell of its former self. The countless clubs along Simpson Road (now Joseph E. Boone

Boulevard) and Bankhead Highway (now Donald Lee Hollowell Parkway) have been torn down, boarded up, or otherwise forgotten. The city too busy to hate has evolved into the city too busy to remember.

If you walk east down Auburn Avenue from Peachtree Street to Boulevard, you can see a little bit of the magic that once was—like the Prince Hall Masonic Building, the first Mason lodge organized by African Americans and the onetime home to WERD, the first black-owned radio station in the United States. While you won't hear much deep soul on the stages of Atlanta's live music venues today, it is not difficult to trace the lineage of the city's modern-day stars back to the 1960s. After-hours venues still exist—if you know where to look—as one generation of late-night partiers continually passes the torch on to the next. There is a worldwide network of collectors who hunt for original copies of records from the sixties-era soul brotherhood and their equally talented ilk—records like "Take Me Back and Try Me" by Roy Lee Johnson, whom Otis Redding planned to produce before his tragic death in a plane crash in 1967, or "Don't Take It Out on Me" by Richard Marks, which has a polished simplicity. The legacy of "Bad Girl" alone has been passed on to a new generation of music fans, not only through its inclusion in the HBO show *Girls*, but thanks to young musicians like Eli "Paperboy" Reed, who recorded the song for his 2009 EP *Ace of Spades*.

Many of the old players have passed, but a few are still around. Hermon Hitson plays sporadic gigs when he's asked, and from time to time his band includes Freddie Terrell on rhythm guitar. If you're a bona fide regular at Northside Tavern, or if you're lucky, you might catch Roy Lee Johnson sitting in with whatever band is playing that night.

The Sweet Auburn soul singers did not find the fame of contemporaries like Otis Redding, James Brown, and Aretha Franklin—all of whom get a generous shout-out in Hermon's "I Got That Will." Their names never did make it to the top. Still, their spirit lives on in contemporary Atlanta; the soul brotherhood helped create a collaborative environment that, decades later, would manifest in the hip-hop scene.

Performers and cities change over time, but quality music will find its way through the noise and endure for those curious enough to find it. Seek out these soul records and groove. 🍌



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# WHEN THE FIRE BROKE OUT

## LIFE AND DEATH IN CABBAGETOWN

BY ABIGAIL COVINGTON

**I**t is said that when Confederate General John Bell Hood torched a reserve supply train idling on tracks near the eastern edge of Atlanta, he created the largest explosion of the Civil War. So loud was the blast that Union Major General William T. Sherman heard it all the way in Jonesboro, twenty miles south. At this moment Sherman declared, “So Atlanta is ours, and fairly won.” The fire signaled to Sherman that Hood, in an effort to contain the collateral damage of Atlanta’s imminent capture, was destroying the city’s strategic assets before retreating. Chief among those assets was the Confederate Rolling Mill, which

was responsible for producing rail track, cannons, and two-inch sheets of iron for Confederate Navy vessels. By the time Sherman arrived in Atlanta on the morning of September 2, 1864, the Confederacy’s second-largest center of production had burned to nothing more than a vast swath of charred land. For nearly twenty-five years afterward, those scorched acres of southeast Atlanta lay barren and vacant. Then, in the 1880s, a German immigrant named Jacob Elsas developed the land and atop the ashes of the Confederate mill built a new mill. The new mill was named the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill, and much like its predecessor, it quickly became a bastion of productivity.



Jacob Elsas didn't have to do much recruiting when it came to filling his mill with workers. At its peak, he employed nearly 2,500 men, women, and children, all of whom lived in tightly packed shotgun houses that, when viewed from above, looked as though they sat under one endless eave. The workers, many of whom came from the North Georgia Appalachians, eventually started calling their settlement Cabbagetown, on account of the putrid stench that hung in the air from the constant boiling of the cruciferous vegetable. The Cabbagetown residents became deeply familiar with hardship, working long hours for poor wages, and they sought refuge in their Appalachian traditions—particularly music.

The decades passed. In 1914 and '15, the mill workers went on strike, but little changed. The company expanded during the Second World War, and Elsas established an on-site nursery. Technological advancements presaged the closing of the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill, and in 1978 it locked its iron gates for good. With their employer no longer in operation, many of the mill workers had no choice but to desert their sequestered village. For those who couldn't afford to leave, the outlook was increasingly bleak.

There weren't many other businesses in the area, and for every house that was inhabited a dozen more were swiftly abandoned. Cabbagetown became a deeply depressed part of Atlanta, but the neighborhood continued to bring forth music, as it had always done. The folk singer Joyce Brookshire—who stayed in the neighborhood, working tirelessly with friends to ensure the well-being of her fellow lintheads who also stayed behind—hosted jam sessions at her house for local musicians, using music as a salve as she watched the neighborhood decline: “We’d sing old songs / About our mountain home / Our music would see us through.”

Other parts of southeast Atlanta were flourishing. A mini artistic renaissance swept through the area in the mid-eighties and brought with it new, alternative music venues, some fashioned out of abandoned bank vaults and warehouses. Bands were everywhere. Little Five Points soon became home to some of Atlanta's biggest venues. It was only a matter of time until people

discovered the small, musically inclined and struggling neighborhood next door.

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When I first arrived in Cabbagetown, on Memorial Day weekend in 2015, I took a quick tour of the area before meeting with a guitarist named Bill Taft, who played music here in the eighties and nineties. I visited the long-abandoned Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill, which has been transformed into a gated community of lofts stylishly designed to blend in with the ruins. Many of the mill's crumbling exterior facades had been preserved, but they look anachronistic now, flanked by modern touches like an enormous swimming pool and a parking garage. A few blocks south is Little's Food Store, which has been open since 1929, surviving decades of economic vulnerability. I met Taft next to Little's, at a table outside of the Carroll Street Café.

Taft was a member of a band called the Chowder Shouters, and his bandmates, Eric Kaiser and John Thomas (called JT), were among the first people to move into the neighborhood after the mill closed and many of the lintheads left. They came in 1986 and Taft, a classmate of JT's from Emory, arrived shortly after. He'd heard about Cabbagetown “on the news, as that place where cops shoot kids at night,” he told me. Quick to befriend them was poet and performance artist Tim Rutenber, who'd moved to the area the year before. Rutenber was a transgressive guy: he had been expelled from high school and college; he'd spent years in a North Carolina commune, in a meditative state that was punctuated by bouts of thorough drug experimentation. He often came to Atlanta to visit his brother Jim. Rutenber came to love the city, moved there, and eventually started hanging out in Cabbagetown at night, working during the day as a construction worker. He and the Chowder Shouters soon began performing together, and



The Rock\*A\*Teens and the Cabbagetown mill (1995)

from their raucous and creative collaborations emerged Ruttenber's onstage persona: Deacon Lunchbox.

According to Ruttenber, Deacon Lunchbox was "a socially conscious redneck poet using backwoods Southern imagery to espouse a progressive political stance." Deacon Lunchbox wasn't a radical departure from Ruttenber's own persona; he was an amplification, a way for Ruttenber to act bold and defiant in front of an audience. Through Deacon Lunchbox, Ruttenber channeled his keen sense of social justice and appreciation for irony. When he performed, he would strap plastic breasts to his chest and brandish a chainsaw, speaking in a deep Southern drawl, full of ire about the despicable nature of prejudice. Offstage, Ruttenber was a gentle bear of a man, full of compassion. The support he lent to his friends' bands when he opened for them helped buoy the developing music culture. Ruttenber was once featured in a WSB-TV human-interest story and, upon being asked what the secret to his poetry was, retorted, "Failure. Failure is where it's at." This idea left an indelible impression on Taft, who told me, "I thought of it as a tremendous opening of my consciousness."

By 1990, many young people—primarily friends of friends of Taft and JT—flocked to the neighborhood, united in their desire to explore music. Atlanta musicians like Kelly Hogan, Chris Lopez, Coleman Lewis, Chan Marshall, and dozens of others moved there, occupying the houses where Jacob Elsas's mill workers had lived. The musicians cross-pollinated, and informal DIY bands started sprouting up like weeds between cracks in the pavement.

Kelly Hogan was the neighborhood's prized vocalist; her passionate, sultry voice endeared her to the entire community. She sang with many bands, most notably the Jody Grind—which fused disparate elements like jazz and country and cabaret and punk. The Jody Grind's music shouldn't have worked, but it did, thanks to Hogan's singing. It's mesmerizing. On parts of the band's debut album, *One Man's Trash Is Another Man's Treasure*, the instrumentation melts in the wake of Hogan's voice and creates a beautiful, harmonious wash for her to sing over. The band's version of Ellington's "Mood Indigo" is nothing more than the steady and pared-back strumming of Taft's guitar and the soft skimming of a hi-hat. Concurrently, Hogan's voice sinks into her lowest register then soars into the upper octaves of her range to spellbinding effect. "We were all just in love with making music," Hogan told me of these years.



Two other important bands at this time were the Opal Foxx Quartet and Smoke, vehicles for the songwriting and theatrics of Robert Curtis Dickerson—a delightfully unhinged and frighteningly insightful drag performer from Jonesboro, Georgia, who went by the name Benjamin. If Tim Ruttenber was Cabbagetown's beloved, redneck father, then Benjamin was its nurturing, cross-dressing mother, and the other members of the Opal Foxx Quartet their ragtag group of children. A mix between a circus and a band, the Opal Foxx Quartet's primary purpose was to write and play loose arrangements that matched Benjamin's coarsely sung poetry. Benjamin began Smoke a while later, after he pared down the Opal Foxx Quartet. "Smoke is the sound of Cabbagetown to me," Hogan said. She's right that Smoke's sound personifies the scene: the music is eerie and crooked, and Benjamin's craggy voice and brooding, swollen eyes seem to embody the hardship that dogged the neighborhood's residents.

But despite the excitement around the Jody Grind, the Opal Foxx Quartet, Smoke, and all the other collaborations happening in Cabbagetown in these years, it was a later band called the Rock\*A\*Teens that became a true centerpiece of the scene. Smoke may have personified Cabbagetown's vibe, but it was this band that preserved its history. As Atlanta-based journalist

Doug DeLoach told me: "To tell the story of the Rock\*A\*Teens is to also tell the story of Cabbagetown and all the bands that came before them."

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The Rock\*A\*Teens came along in the early nineties, after a string of tragedies rocked the Cabbagetown community and unraveled several of these bands. One night in 1992, along a lonesome stretch of Highway 65 near Greenville, Alabama, Tim Ruttenber and two members of the Jody Grind—their bassist, Robert Hayes, and drummer, Rob Clayton—were killed instantly when a drunk driver crossed over a grassy median and hit their van head-on. The group was on its way back to Georgia after performing a series of shows in North Florida. Bill Taft and Kelly Hogan had opted to stay in Pensacola and drive back the next morning; they didn't learn of the tragedy until they returned to Cabbagetown the next day. Taft once detailed his reaction in *Creative Loafing*: "I got to my house and my wife came out and I knew the minute I saw her something bad had happened. She told me, and I just stood there and started crying."

For those who knew Ruttenber, Hayes, and Clayton, the accident was unfathomable. "How could Tim be gone?" JT once reflected. The traumatic end to the Jody Grind and the





sudden absence of Deacon Lunchbox affected even those who didn't live in Cabbagetown. Record producer and Indigo Girls member Amy Ray told me that the "car accident created this overarching sadness in Cabbagetown that just snowballed. It was so tragic and shocking."

Many of the musicians who played in the Opal Foxx Quartet were affected, too, especially future Rock\*A\*Teens front man Chris Lopez and his dear friend Allen Page. Page was a versatile drummer who also played with Lopez in Cabbagetown's metal bands: Dirt, Seersucker, and the New Centurions, a group that began when Benjamin ended the Opal Foxx Quartet. He was a bit of a wild man—once, after band practice, he shot a hole through the ceiling of Lopez's house at 711 Wylie Street. "Allen was a sweet, wonderful human being and a great drummer," Athens-based producer David Barbe told me. "But he also had a problem that got the best of him." On February 28, 1994, right before a New Centurions gig, Page overdosed on heroin while sitting in his car, which was parked right outside of 711 Wylie. Everyone I talked to said the same thing: his death felt like lightning striking the same place twice.

Hogan is an eloquent woman, but when it came to discussing Page's death, she was nearly speechless. "It was just—fuck, man, fuck." She remembered simply wanting "everybody to stop dying." I asked her what she did after Page died. She said, "We all just kept playing music."

Taft and Hogan continued to meet up every Thursday for practice. Taft also joined Smoke. Chris Lopez stayed at 711 Wylie, and Hogan

wandered there to play, too. Lopez began teaching Hogan guitar and soon they were writing together. Lopez's friend from work, Chris Verene, eventually offered himself as their drummer and brought Justin Hughes, a young guitarist, with him. Without clear direction, the four of them jammed, Chris Lopez writing the songs. It was the spring of 1994 and what would soon become the Rock\*A\*Teens was still nothing more than a group of friends getting together and writing music about all they'd been through.

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In telling the Rock\*A\*Teens' origin story, it's tempting to jump to obvious conclusions: They were sad so they played loud music; X happened so then Y occurred. And sometimes this hypothesis holds up. I sheepishly asked Lopez if he thought the tragedies he experienced affected his songwriting process. "I don't really have any idea," he said. "No more so than other things, I guess." I could picture his shoulders shrugging over the phone. He did admit that if he hadn't been living in Cabbagetown, "a lot of those songs would've never been written." Chris Verene put it more candidly: "We were definitely united by people dying and a sense of loss."

Despite Lopez's hesitance to admit it, images from Cabbagetown clearly found their way into his writing—a wild thatch of overgrown kudzu wrapped around the bumper of a rotted-out car, a dingy shopping cart full of old Busch Light precariously parked in the middle of Carroll

Street. So did confessions of his grief over Allen Page's death. Lopez's powerful lyrics demanded a band, and his three friends could sense something coming. Verene remembers that time this way: "It wasn't a band at first. It was just us playing, but once we started putting songs together, it was electric." The way they all tell it, the Rock\*A\*Teens started sort of by accident, only after realizing they had written a handful of really good songs. Verene recognized the Rock\*A\*Teens' piquant flavoring and prodded them along. He even named the band. From the very start, the Rock\*A\*Teens were unrestrained in their outpourings. Thinking about their raucous start-up sound, I'm reminded of a Smoke lyric from the song "Awake": "When heartache rears her ugly head, well I'll look her in the eye and I'll kiss her on the mouth. I'll hold my head up high." That's what the Rock\*A\*Teens sound like—battered but defiant in the face of death.

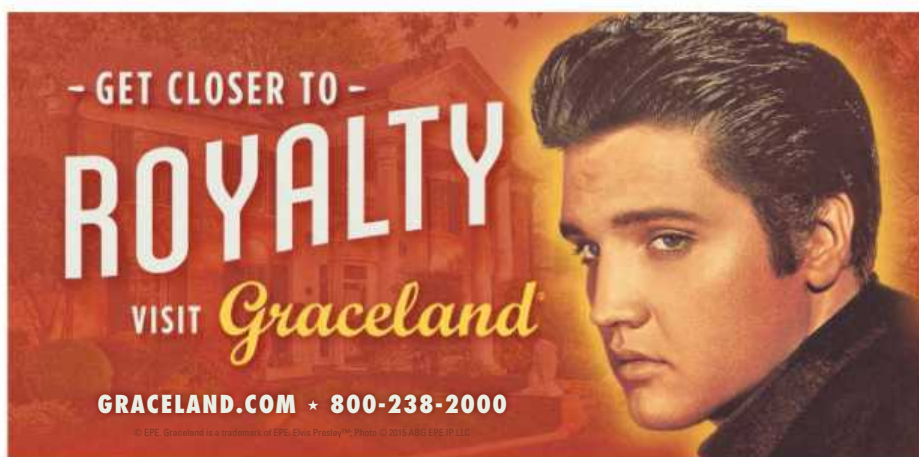
Aiding them in their effort was Chris Lopez's amp—an old Epiphone Futura. When it came to fulfilling the Rock\*A\*Teens' rebellious reverb sound, that amp did a lot of the heavy lifting. Turned all the way up, it could create its own sporadic sonic distortions, which only furthered the on-the-fly sound the Rock\*A\*Teens became known for. "I don't think we could've sounded the way we did without that amp," Lopez told me. And the way they sounded wasn't like anything else going on at the time. In the post-Nirvana alt-rock soundscape of the mid-nineties, the Rock\*A\*Teens were an outlier, even within their own city. Seattle had grunge, but rockabilly was the rage in Atlanta, and the Rock\*A\*Teens

particularly enjoyed lampooning that scene. “Don’t make me go to the rockabilly ghetto / Don’t leave me behind,” Lopez shouts over a dramatic chord progression and ironic saloon-style piano plunking. While it’s spectacularly shambolic, the song is far from discordant thanks to Kelly Hogan’s punctuated vocals.

Throughout the Rock\*A\*Teens’ first two albums—*The Rock\*A\*Teens* and *Cry*—Hogan’s spare but stirring vocals act as guardrails that keep a freewheeling Chris Lopez from singing himself right off a cliff. But Hogan left the band in 1996, and it’s after then that Lopez’s voice breaks from the mold, particularly on their Merge Records debut, *Baby, a Little Rain Must Fall*. In those songs, Lopez sounds entirely uncaged, and perhaps nowhere in the Rock\*A\*Teens’ discography does he ululate more violently than on the track “I Could’ve Just Died,” a piece Herculean in both its music and lyrics. The song opens with a spine-straightening coupling—the ride cymbal and snare drum—and then barrels into a wailing wall of reverb and distortion. Lopez exhausts himself a few times and abandons this lyric before he’s able to pronounce its final syllable: “Iiiiiiiiiiii, yeah I could’ve / just diiiieeeeeeeee . . .” He trails off before audibly inhaling and screaming it again. Lopez spares no part of himself.

There are times when I listen to this song and I imagine myself at a house party where someone has just busted through the front door and delivered urgent, buzz-crushing news—the energy that’s left is channeled into a sorrowful swivet as people start abandoning the party at breakneck speeds; I fall on my face; I pick myself back up and keep running; I search for a safe house and a couch to crash on; I am crying in the wind. By the end of the song, I am exhausted.

Though their music didn’t really have any kind of predetermined style, the Rock\*A\*Teens had plenty of influences—especially late fifties rock & roll and how that genre related to rhythm. Some of their songs are so fast—think Link Wray, Dick Dale, Bo Diddley. When they got onstage, “it would be even faster than we planned,” Verene said. “It required me to play at my utmost.” In clips of the band’s early concerts, you can see in Verene’s and Hughes’s wincing faces the physical effort they exerted in order to keep up with Lopez’s manic performance. Imagine taking the already hypercharged “You’re Gonna Miss Me” by the garage-psych rockers the 13th Floor Elevators and doubling the beats-per-minute. That might get you somewhere close to the pacing of “Lucia P,” from the Rock\*A\*Teens’ debut album. The grandiosity of it all, the emotional lyrics, the



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ambitious arrangements, the cinematic imagery, the yowling—this strange combination of elements was unprecedented at the time. It's only recently that the anthemic sound put forth by the Rock\*A\*Teens has come into vogue, thanks to the success of Arcade Fire.

If the Rock\*A\*Teens had any kind of defining feature it was their commitment to a lack of pretense. Amy Ray, who signed the group to her label, Daemon Records, said, "They had a totally different kind of ambition. They were ambitious in the moment and only about the art." From the way they dressed onstage—usually in some uncoordinated assortment of khaki-colored garments and thick-rimmed glasses—to their own laconic explanations for their critically lauded albums, the Rock\*A\*Teens represented what it means to make music without an agenda, almost to an extreme. Album sales or mailing lists didn't matter much to the band. They focused exclusively on writing music. Oftentimes, Ray felt like she was more enthusiastic about the band's prospects than they were. Validating moments—like signing with Daemon and later getting picked up by Merge—encouraged the Rock\*A\*Teens to keep making music. But according to Kelly Hogan, "Those things just hap-

pened. We weren't ever trying to get signed."

When I asked Ray if she thought the band ever deliberately undermined their chances at success, she was quick to reply, "Not at all. They were just non-compromising and true to their community."

The song "If I Wanted to Be Famous (I'd Have Shot Someone)" is like an anthem in that way. Its dark, wry lines could have been plastered on the entrance to Cabbagetown to ward off any opportunistic musicians with suitcases full of professional ambitions. But everyone in Atlanta who knew about Cabbagetown knew it wasn't where you went to get famous. It wasn't Brooklyn. It wasn't even Seattle. If anything, it was the antithesis of those destinations. It was a place where opportunity was sacrificed at art's altar. At the beginning of the song "Arm in Arm, in the Golden Twilite, We Loitered On..." Lopez sings of a person who "doesn't come around as much / Ever since he heard about that stuff." By describing this friend who no longer feels safe coming around, Lopez perfectly evokes the place that friend refuses to visit—a place where harrowing incidents occur more frequently than one would like. Lopez said to me, "In my heart of hearts, I hope that these lyrics invoke

a mythological place." Except that place isn't mythological at all. It's just Cabbagetown.

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As I walked around the neighborhood in May, I saw remnants of the place that Chris Lopez had borne witness to in his songs. Many of the houses have been repainted, in pastel yellow and blue, but their porches' floorboards remain crooked and uneven. Where there once were dusty lots, there are now manicured front lawns—but the earth beneath them still sinks in odd places. Even recent upgrades to 711 Wylie can't completely mask its history. The low-pitched roof and humble front porch reveal its past as a tattered mill house.

Not everybody wants to revisit the past. Kelly Hogan left Cabbagetown in 1997. "I just couldn't keep driving down the street where Allen had died," she said to me in a tearful moment on the phone. Verene also moved away after the band signed to Merge. That left Chris Lopez alone to play the drums on *Baby, a Little Rain Must Fall*—after which the drummer Ballard Lesemann joined, soon followed by Will Joiner on bass. The Olympics came and went

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and brought masses of yuppies to the city's less-crowded parts. Then it was 1998. The people who still lived in Cabbagetown could finally sense that their neighborhood was changing.

To borrow a phrase from Hogan, Cabbagetown in the nineties was like a "supersaturated solution." People fell in and out of love, friends died, babies were born. Things that generally happen to most people over the span of one lifetime, across many places, had happened at warp speed to several people within a few cramped acres of land in southeast Atlanta. One more dose of pain and the whole neighborhood could combust, which it did, after Benjamin died of liver failure caused by hepatitis C on January 29, 1999. "All of us being close to Benjamin, and appreciating his art, united us in some way," Chris Verene said. Benjamin's death also meant the end of Smoke. For so long, Benjamin's presence had been as towering as the smokestacks that loomed over Cabbagetown. His death turned what was already a chasm into a void, and most of the neighborhood's remaining residents scattered elsewhere.

On April 12, 1999, the old Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill did as the Confederate Rolling Mill had done all those years before: it caught fire. The mill—the longstanding emblem of Cabbagetown's history—was in the midst of being renovated into lofts and condominiums when the flames hit. "When did the Cabbagetown scene end?" I asked almost every person I interviewed. The answer was unanimous: "When the fire broke out." Chris Lopez continued to live at 711 Wylie Street until 2001, long after his friends had moved—to Chicago, to New York, into the firmament, across town. But to a chronicler, a story's ending is just as pertinent as its beginning. The fire at the mill and Benjamin's death—these things were now as much a part of Cabbagetown's history as the lintheads and the loss of Allen Page. Lopez had one more chapter to write, which he did, ever so nostalgically, on the band's final album, *Sweet Bird of Youth*.

On this album, recorded in 2000, everything has already happened. Lopez writes in the past tense about nights when "we were young and we ran circles round all the pretty ones," about the "town that put us under," and about "how they left and how it stung." *Sweet Bird of Youth* isn't a defiant last stand; it's a eulogy. The Rock\*A\*Teens had outlived every other Cabbagetown band and, through five albums and various lineups, reluctantly preserved the history of the neighborhood until it drew its final fiery breath. Then it was done. "Strike down the band," Lopez mourns. "The play has closed." 🐦



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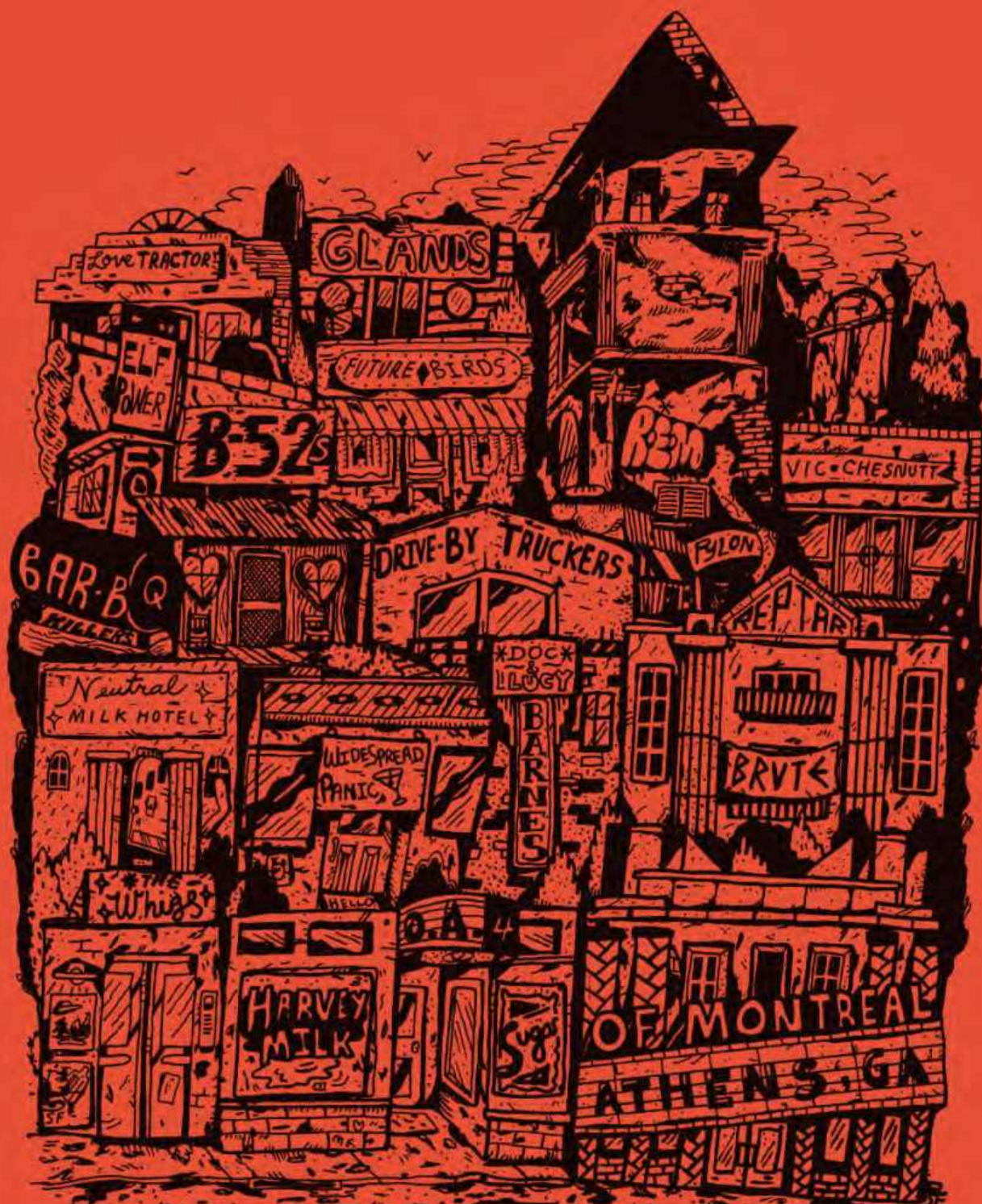
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# ATHENS

## ATHENS



## WHY ATHENS?

by

David Barbe

**R**ock music fans know the basics: the B-52's begat Pylon, Pylon begat R.E.M., etc. But that hardly explains why there is a famous music scene here, of all places. What is it about Athens? Well, for starters, Athens is a college town. Every fall there is an influx of bright, creative, young people on the verge of discovery. And of course there are economic considerations, namely cheap rent, cheap beer, and affordable practice spaces. The less money one needs, the less time spent at work, the more time one has to start a band, throw a house party, or hop in a van and go on tour.

Today, the fact remains that people from other places most associate the music of Athens with R.E.M. To Athenians, the influence of R.E.M.'s music is equal to the impact of their attitude about it and the way they went about their business. >>



“We’re not the best rock & roll band in America.” That’s what drummer Bill Berry said when that title was bestowed upon R.E.M. on the cover of *Rolling Stone* in December 1987. Instead, Berry gave that distinction to Pylon, who by then had been disbanded for a few years. This was not the only time a member of R.E.M. sidestepped accolade, choosing instead to share the spotlight with a lesser-known hometown band.

R.E.M.’s public support of the Athens music scene is well known, but they were also supportive in private ways. Local bands were able to score coveted opening slots on their shows, and the band members kept newer (read: poorer) musicians supplied with barely used bass strings and drumsticks. They established a practice of reaching out (or down, or back, depending on your point of view) and paying it forward—propping up their contemporaries. In turn, as the recipients of their generosity developed their own careers, they continued the trend. Drive-By Truckers, Futurebirds, and of Montreal give local bands high-profile opening slots. Widespread Panic covers songs by Bloodkin and Vic Chesnutt. Hell, they even wrote a song called “Love Tractor.”

Perhaps of greater importance than opening slots, press mentions, and free drumsticks is this: R.E.M. treated people well—employees, crew, venue owners, radio deejays, writers, opening bands, local charities, everybody. They weren’t too big for their britches. This was true when they were a rising force in small clubs and on college radio, and it remained true when they became international superstars. R.E.M.’s kindness permeated the culture here. Turns out it’s a lot more enjoyable to make friends than enemies.

**I ARRIVED IN 1981** as a seventeen-year-old college freshman, and although I knew about the B-52’s, who were already sort of stars by then, I was in the dark about the real underground scene. The nudge for me was in UGA’s student newspaper, the *Red & Black*. One day, I saw a picture of a local band, Little Tigers, and a mention of their show that



night. I recognized the bassist as a former bandmate from my adolescent years in Atlanta, so I decided to check it out.

Walking into the 40 Watt Club was like entering a new world. It was a packed room of maybe a hundred people (did it hold that many?) dancing, moving as one pulsating throng. Everybody was having a good time and seemed to know everybody else. Even better, it seemed like nobody on the outside had any idea this thing existed.

**OCCASIONALLY, I RUN INTO** people who were here thirty years ago (or twenty, or ten) and then left for a more sensible adult pursuit. Inevitably, they ask me if the Athens music scene of today is anywhere

near as good as it was in their own halcyon college years. I've always given the same response: "It's even better." This answer is often met with disbelief. "It can't be." "Impossible." "It was so special then." It was special then, no doubt about it. Nonetheless, it keeps on growing.

In 2015, the music scene in Athens is a far different animal from 1981, when there were a couple of clubs and a handful of art-school bands. Today there are hundreds of local musicians encompassing rock, hip-hop, country, jazz, EDM, post-punk, jam, reggae, pop, metal, whatever. There are myriad live music venues. There are professional recording studios (and a zillion home versions). There are record labels, managers, booking agents, publicists, concert promoters, bloggers, and graphic designers. There is greater synergy with the University of Georgia and the music community. The Willson Center for Humanities and Arts promotes a downtown music festival. Every year of its decade of existence, the UGA Music Business Program, where I work, has set new records for

student applications.

The music scene is bigger and, yes, it is different, but a creative movement cannot remain stagnant if it is to remain vital. You have to keep on moving. In spite of all of this growth, transformation, and official business, there are some things that remain the same, or at least feel born of a similar spirit. There is still a strong DIY ethic. There are still house parties, and loads of new bands. Just as in the mid-1980s we added Bar-B-Q Killers, the La-Di-Da's, Eat America, Porn Orchard, and Time Toy, in the mid-2010s we now have New Madrid, Muuy Biien, Shade, the Hernies, Grand Vapids, and Ruby the RabbitFoot, to name just a few.

**THE BATTLE BETWEEN ART** and commerce is an old one. Maybe the music scene in Athens thrives because the relationship between the two is more about coexistence than competition. Maybe it really is the cheap rent and cheap beer. Maybe it's just luck.

Maybe it's just a thing that is. 🐔



## DON CHAMBERS (SINGER/SONGWRITER)

To participate in the Athens scene of the late eighties and early nineties, you didn't *have* to be a freak, but if you couldn't hang with the guy in the dress, the girl with the chicken-foot necklace, or half a dozen reprobates with a powerful distaste for popular culture (which they expressed through scathing sarcastic humor)—well, then you would be uncomfortable. The streets may be a bit cleaner today, but at its heart this place remains the proverbial Petri dish in a science lab, a strange cultish summer camp that never ended, a circus that never left town.

## DAVE SCHOOLS (WIDESPREAD PANIC)

After R.E.M. got big with their trademark Southern Gothic jangle, a whole new crop of bands came up in their hometown and the scene quickly split into two distinct camps. One was an aggressive art-punk sound represented by groups like the Bar-B-Q Killers, Porn Orchard, and Mercyland. The other camp was governed more or less by traditional songwriting and guitar-driven soloing (read: hippies), and at the epicenter were Widespread Panic, Bloodkin, and White Buffalo. If you were to revisit the local rags of the day, the ink would give you the idea that these two tines were diametrically opposed and hated each other. Their fans most likely did.

I remember a helluva daylong house party out on North Avenue, where all of the "hippie" bands played sets. A steady supply of keg beer ensured that the momentum of the party kept increasing as the day progressed. The cops never showed up, but plenty of "punks" came to take part in the revelry. Rick Berg did his famous cock sock dance on the roof (always a sure sign of a great party in those days) and fell off into the bushes seemingly unhurt. After the beer taps had run dry, the party turned inward, and we found ourselves hanging out in a bedroom, passing around a bottle of liquor and a bong. While my bandmate Mikey Houser and Laura Carter drank stashed beers, I shared a pipe with my friend Deanna Mann, a local artist. Half joking, I said something about the passing of a peace pipe, since certain music writers in town were fond of playing up the supposed animosity between our spheres.

We had each come to Athens for an education, but we stayed because we found a freedom in which we could thrive as artists and as members of a community not unlike a "Mayberry on acid," as some of us called it. There was a time when music writers pondered what was in the drinking supply that made Athens such a productive source.

I can tell you this about Athens: It ain't the water.

It's the people.





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# WELCOME HINGES

by

Art Rosenbaum



One summer evening in 1981, I knocked on the door of a modest house on a street improbably named the Plaza in Athens, Georgia, looking for a man who, I had been told, knew some old-time work songs. Around town, people were aware that I was interested in the vernacular, rather than the popular, music of the region, and an acquaintance had heard an African-American cement finisher he hired to put in a driveway singing a song to the strokes of his pickax. The listener recognized this as the kind of work songs John and Alan Lomax and others had recorded in the prisons of the South, and called me. When a very portly Henry Grady Terrell opened the door, we both said, almost in unison, “I know you!”

We had met before, at the home of gospel singers Doc and Lucy Barnes on the other side of town, a house that Terrell had named the Holy Ghost Headquarters, because, in Doc’s words, “We have more singing here than in any church!” Terrell had sung informally and in gospel groups with Doc, and had given up the singing of worldly songs—unless he thought no one was listening—so at first he was reluctant to admit to knowing the work

songs. After some persuasion he agreed to give it a try, and we went over to Doc’s house, where “Big Boy” Terrell started swinging a pickax—he couldn’t give voice to the song without doing the work it was bound to—and sang:

*I’m gonna ring—wbab!—this old hammer—wbab!*

*I’m gonna ring—wbab!—this old hammer—wbab!*

*And then go home—wbab!—oh partner—wbab!—and then go home—wbab!*

And similarly:

*Ol’ John Henry died on the mountain  
He was a-whipping steel  
Ain’t gonna tell nobody my right name,  
My name is Sam, and I don’t give a—wbab!*

*Anybody ask you was I running,  
Tell ’em I was flying*

*I’m going ’cross the Blue Ridge Mountain  
Fore the sun goes down. >>*



CLAIRE CAMPBELL  
(HOPE FOR AGOLDENSUMMER)

The lady standing in my sister’s front yard is wearing Bart Simpson pajamas. It is 9:00 P.M. on a Sunday. She is sobbing and asking, “Why?”

Why? Why? Why?

I know why.

It is because we are having another house party.

My sister, Page, lives in John Fernandes’s purple house at the end of Boulevard. You will know John’s name because he has been in almost every Elephant 6 band. He is a psychedelic fiddler, a landlord, and he’s sanctioned this party that will surely leave the linoleum sticky with beer, the floorboards covered in red clay.

To start, my tiny folk band, Hope for Agoldensummer, premieres our music video and serves pie (three pumpkins from the nearby Washington Farms yields two pies, but there are one hundred fifty people at this party). After pie we have Music Hates You. They’re a shredding, bawdy, overdriven tumbleweed. They are our opposite and we love them. In lieu of cash payment, we have made them a goodie bag full of Halloween candy, mini bottles of Jameson, items of questionable legality.

Music Hates You’s sound check is ear piercing and takes too long. Page’s neighbors begin to appear on the front lawn, demanding to see her. By the time the band starts their first song, Page and I are standing in the front yard, tipsy, taking a severe cussing from the woman in Bart Simpson PJs. She calls Page a great many obscenities, such as “bitch” and “townie.” She weeps, “Why would you do this on a Sunday night? Why?”

A policeman arrives. “Ma’am,” he tells Page, “I heard the band from two miles away. Two miles!” We are issued a noise violation ticket. I stop the band after their third song. All the PJs go home. All the townies go home. We watch *Twin Peaks* and share a slice of pie I’d kept hidden.



## ANDREW RIEGER (ELF POWER)



Outlets for new music were limited when I was growing up in the small, conservative town of Greenwood, South Carolina, in the seventies and eighties. Before MTV became ubiquitous, my brother and I would sit for hours in front of the radio listening to Casey Kasem's Top 40 countdown, making detailed lists of the current hits, and alternate charts of our own Top 40. This early record keeping turned into a serious project in 1983, when I began making a list of every show I've ever attended (#1: country-rock band Alabama). Keeping count all these years has been a consistent pleasure in my life, and friends will often ask me to consult the List to clarify what year and at which club a certain band played. I recently surpassed 3,500 shows. Some do stand out:

### #7 REPLACEMENTS / DRIVIN N CRYIN (1987)

When I was in high school, my dad drove me and some of my friends the hour and a half to Athens to see this show at the Tate Student Center on UGA's campus. The Replacements were so drunk that more than once they started playing the same song they had just finished. Their sloppy, drunken buffoonery was a revelation. I learned that good songs and good energy could be more important than technical proficiency.

### #98 NIRVANA / DAS DAMEN (1991)

The 40 Watt Club saw many national acts stop through on their way to greater fame, including Nirvana's crazed performance, which happened right as "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was taking over MTV and radio. By the end of the show, Kurt Cobain had torn down the film screen hanging above the stage, blanketing the first few rows of sweaty fans, who then dutifully ripped it to shreds.

### #154 GWAR / MELVINS (1992)

These theatrical space-metalheads and grunge masters were shut down mid-set at the Georgia Theatre. The Athens-Clarke County police officers cited obscenity after GWAR's elaborately constructed fake papier-mâché cuttlefish ejaculated fake semen and blood all over the appreciative audience. The band later teamed up with the ACLU and received an apology and out-of-court settlement from the Athens police.

### #248 JACK 'O' NUTS (1993)

The math-rock noise fiends kicked off this show at the Georgia Bar without Laura Carter, their maniacal and diminutive singer. She made her entrance in the tiny service elevator used to transport booze from the storeroom upstairs, surprising the crowd as she leapt from the elevator, grabbed the microphone, and seamlessly joined the band mid-song!

### #1332 BALLARD LESEMAN WITH MICHAEL STIPE (2002)

To celebrate the twentieth anniversary of R.E.M.'s debut EP, *Chronic Town*, *Flagpole Magazine's* music editor performed it in its entirety at the Engine Room, singing and playing bass to prerecorded drums and guitar. When Michael Stipe caught wind of the show, he arrived unannounced to sing backup vocals.

### #3103 JANDEK (2012)

For almost fifteen years, I have put on shows with my Elf Power bandmate Laura Carter (unrelated to the late Jack 'O' Nuts legend of the same name) at the Orange Twin Conservation Community, a 150-acre eco-village with a natural amphitheatre in the woods. In 2012, we hosted the unlikely performance of reclusive experimental artist Jandek, backed by members of Deerhunter and Olivia Tremor Control. Jandek later released that night's ethereal and haunting improvisational piece as a live album.

Terrell's singing was no rough chant, but showed a mastery of phrasing and vocal ornamentation. He demonstrated how he and his fellow workers would take a break by twirling the pick over his head, like the rotors of a helicopter, to amuse the boss man while they caught their breath. His song evoked hard times, grueling labor, and the determination of a man "scouting," escaping across the mountains. He had never been in prison, but he learned the songs from former convicts and others on road gangs. He reaffirmed that he preferred to sing spiritual songs, but "the other kind of singing, that's way back when you were—beating a dog with a 'simmon tree! The world was on fire, then. They put that fire out, on them jobs."

When I moved to Athens in 1976, to teach studio art at the university, the influential rock music scene was yet to burst forth. I soon met the fiddler and singer Gordon Tanner, son of Gid Tanner, founder of the 1920s and '30s string band the Skillet Lickers, who lived between Athens and Atlanta; the Ellers, a family of old-time musicians in the mountains a couple of hours north; Maude Thacker, a mountain singer of old ballads; and many more. When the rock scene did emerge, most—though not all—of its young musicians were ignorant of and indifferent to the vernacular music of the region. Michael Stipe, a curly-haired and intensely imaginative student in my class—later to be the front man of the celebrated rock band R.E.M.—for example, was more interested in the type of creativity and aura projected by Andy Warhol than by earlier blues, or even r&b, said to be the sources of rock & roll. This would change, at least for Michael, when he met Reverend Howard Finster, whose prolific and antic creativity burst forth in his famed Paradise Garden up in northwest Georgia, where Finster showed that one (at least he) could make art out of the fusion of imagination and what could be found in the county dump, although he ascribed his process to God. And Finster was a singer, a rough-and-ready banjo-picker, a songsmith, and a poet—actually one of the finer American vernacular voices. Another change in Michael's respect for regional traditional music came when Brant Slay, a mutual friend, played for him a recording I had made of Cecil Barfield, a South Georgia bluesman. First recorded by George Mitchell, Barfield never attained great fame or traveled far beyond his tenant shack, although his intensity has been compared to the best Delta bluesmen. I don't know that Barfield directly influenced R.E.M., but as Ezra Pound



said, “artists are the antennae of the race,” and antennae do connect with one another.

**DOC AND LUCY HAD** been my first connection to the enduring traditions of African-American music in the Athens area. Shortly after my arrival in town, a young white guitar finger-picker named Bill Giles told me I needed to meet Doc, who played “the old style.” That he did, and the wiry, earnest septuagenarian and his ever-amused wife and singing partner, Lucy, introduced me and my wife, Margo—who photographed the musicians I was meeting and recording—to many African-American singers of sacred music, some players and singers of blues and pre-blues music, and some who accepted both. (Fiddler/guitarist Joe Rakestraw had performed in string bands with his brothers at country dances on Saturday nights and played spirituals on Sunday—this was all right with his father, he said, as long as he didn’t pat his foot.)

The Barneses took us not only to services but to singings at African-American churches, where we were always welcomed, often told, “Our church doors swing on welcome hinges.” At these singings, groups or choirs from many churches could come by and offer two selections of their own; this gave us the opportunity to hear practitioners of myriad styles, from modern gospel to very old antebellum spiri-

tual and hymn singing. The Brown’s Chapel Choir of Bishop was a powerful proponent of the latter tradition. Another was Doc and Lucy’s group, the W. B. Thomas Gospel Chorus of the Macedonia Baptist Church in Athens. If one’s idea of an African-American church choir resembles a large group of gowned singers swaying from side to side together as they sing, neither the Brown’s Chapel Choir nor the Gospel Chorus conform.

Doc and Lucy’s group consisted of one man and four women, who sang old spirituals in an a cappella style harking back to pre-Emancipation days. They accepted Doc’s rhythmic guitar for some songs, but their strength was in forging a unity from the individuality of each singer: the oldest, Sister Naomi Bradford, had a voice that soared like a swallow and her presence, with her flowing white hair, anchored the group; Doc’s sister, Clyde Gilmore, stood stolid and sang almost to herself; Mavis Moon was a rock of endurance in voice and presence; and Lucy chuckled at the diverse approaches of her fellow singers, even as her voice gave a sweet continuity to the singing. Their repertoires were vast: in a side table Doc kept a notebook in which he had written the titles of several hundred

sacred songs he and Lucy could sing. A verse of just one of them:

*I met my elder this mornin’  
Goin’ up the hill so soon.  
Got to make heaven in due time  
Before the heaven door close.*

*I say, wake me, Lord, shake me Lord!  
Don’t let me sleep too late.  
Get up early in the mornin’,  
Gonna swing on the golden gate.*

Yes, and there was worldly music, too, in the black community of Athens, music that, like Terrell’s work songs and Rakestraw’s blues and frolic fiddling, harked back to earlier times. Most of this could only be found in homes, back porches, and house parties and dances. There was some commercial entertainment, notably at the Morton Theatre. Established in 1910, and still in use today, the Morton was the only venue in town for black professional entertainers, among them early bluesmen Roy Dunn, Curley Weaver, and Blind Willie McTell. Very few Athenians were among the performers whose talents were tapped by early commercial recording companies, but this was happenstance rather than merit. I was told by a retired down-home musician, William Arthur Lumpkin, that there were, in the 1920s, more than thirty excellent local black musicians in Athens and environs who played fiddle, >>

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banjo, guitar, twelve-string guitar, and more, who could be called on to play in juke joints and at fish-fries and frolics.

One old-style musician who was still in his prime when we met him was the blues harp player and singer Neal Pattman. He had lost an arm in a boyhood farm accident, but could bend notes on his harmonica as well as any two-armed player. His music was strictly local in his early years, at country gatherings and at a juke joint he ran in “the bottoms” near the railroad station. Late in life, he was recognized as a fine performer of pre-blues traditional pieces like “John Henry” and “Lost John,” as well as rural and, later, urban blues, and even sacred music. In 1980, he was invited to play at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and toured in Europe. I treasure the memory of going to the Winnipeg Folk Festival with Neal, two young white musicians, Brant Slay and Ben Reynolds—whose “swamp rock” duo was called the Chickasaw Mudd Puppies—and Precious Bryant, a South Georgia blueswoman of Neal’s generation. I suggested a set called “Georgia House Party.” We had never all played together. We started with a sound check, which moved seamlessly into a stream of songs, tunes, blues, and played for an hour. We had the time of our lives, and the audience seemed pleased as well.

Shortly after I met the Barneses, Doc said that I should meet Jim and Mae Wills. Jim, who could play “anything with strings on it,” had worked in the cotton mills with Doc, and the couples were friends and played music together. Knowing that black and white music forms had mingled and cross-pollinated for generations in Southern music, I was not surprised to learn that the Willses were white. And Neal Pattman had not only swapped tunes and licks with the Chickasaw Mudd Puppies but he had a band of admiring white sidemen in his later-life gigs. These instances of black and white musical friendships and interchanges in one community are not exceptional but typical in the South, over decades, even centuries. Whites learned banjo culture from blacks; blacks took up the European fiddle; blacks adapted white hymnody to their church culture; in the cotton ports, black banjo songs morphed into stevedore and sea chanteys; and blues early on crossed racial lines—the examples are endless.



**THE OLDER BLACK SECULAR** music has, in Athens as elsewhere, been largely superseded by new forms of blues and rap. Doc and Lucy’s nephew, Mickey Gilmore, still blows a little bit of blues harp, but the days when musicians like Joe Peelin blew his quills on Broad Street and Fred Sheats would play old-time guitar rags as his dogs danced on Hot Corner are long gone. Some traditional African-American churches maintain the traditions of lined-out hymns and old-fashioned spirituals. And Rev. Willie Mae Eberhart still beats time on her tambourine to her intense singing of gospel songs and jubilees in her Sanctified church, even as she misses the rolling piano of her late friend, Mother Fleeta Mitchell. Fleeta, and her husband, Rev. Nathaniel Mitchell, were also close friends and singing companions of Doc and Lucy in the milieu of Athens black religious singing that I was fortunate to encounter and record. Fleeta and Nathaniel met in the 1920s at the Georgia Academy for the Blind in Macon, where two of their classmates were Pearly Brown (later Reverend Pearly Brown) and Blind Willie McTell. A charming vignette from those years that Mother Mitchell shared with me: she played the part of Little Red Riding Hood in a school play, and Willie McTell played the wood-chopper who saved her from the Big Bad Wolf. In later years, after a period of fame as an early blues and spiritual recording artist, McTell would visit Athens and play at church with his old schoolmates. That would have been something to hear!

Athens, Georgia, is still a music town; as for the local vernacular music, most has faded away. There are fine younger musicians who play Irish music and sing sea chanteys at the >>

## MICHELLE GILZENRAT DAVIS

(FORMER MUSIC EDITOR OF *FLAGPOLE MAGAZINE*)

It’s inevitable: if you live in Athens long enough, you’ll end up in a band. For me it took ten years and an invitation to play in an annual event called Athens Business Rocks. The premise is simple: form a band with your coworkers and play a short set of covers in a battle of the bands at the 40 Watt. Fans “vote” with their dollars, and proceeds benefit Nuçi’s Space, an invaluable nonprofit that provides mental health care and other essential resources for musicians in town.

Despite years of reporting on the local music scene, I had never actively participated in it. My guitar shredding was reserved for the bedroom, and any ambition to perform before an audience had long since been abandoned. As it turned out, I wasn’t the only one in town suppressing rock star aspirations. I’ve seen teachers, doctors, mechanics, bankers, engineers, and caterers make their rock club debuts at ABR, and they absolutely kill it. I’m talking about technical skill, showmanship, and stage presence—the whole package. I don’t know any other town this small that could pull this off, to be so replete with talent and so eager to give novices like me a chance.

And what’s more, jamming with your coworkers does wonders for morale. Preparing for our debut as the McCommonists (named in honor of *Flagpole*’s leftist editor, Pete McCommons) brought the entire staff together. Advertising reps spent their lunch breaks crafting stage props; editorial meetings turned into jam sessions. I am forever grateful for the chance to feel the warmth and energy of performing a sold-out show at the 40 Watt, and I like to think that our paper became better for it, too.





Globe pub, and lots of string band and blues enthusiasts among the students and townies. The North Georgia Folk Festival had its thirty-first year at Sandy Creek Park in 2015. The present-day Skillet Lickers performed at the festival in 2014, but most of the old-timers of the region who shared the stage with younger musicians are gone: banjo-pickers W. Guy Bruce and Mabel Cawthorn, the Ellers from Towns County, the Mitchells, Joe Rakestraw, Neal Pattman, Doc and Lucy.

A few strands of tradition remain, some in the old-time churches, some strictly within family circles, with folks who treasure songs passed down from earlier generations. I know that the late Dr. Ben Barrow's daughters, Betty and Nancy, will continue to love and sing the ditties they learned as girls from their father, as they rode around with him on house calls. One is "Mammy Black Cat":

*If I had a thousand bricks I'd build my chimney higher*

*To keep old mammy black cat from jumping in the fire.*

*And lay ten dollars down, and count them one by one.*

*And lay ten dollars down, and count them two by two.*

Occasionally Bill Presley will show up at the J & J Flea Market north of Athens, offering novelty instruments of his own invention, like the "pan-jo," an aluminum frying pan with five banjo strings running over the back along an accurately fretted hand-carved neck; flip it over, and Bill has painted realistic eggs and bacon on the inside. He grew up in a sharecropping family, and plays a "real" guitar and sings old ballads like "John Riley" and new songs of his own composition like "The Flea Market Blues." He is white, and his hero is Martin Luther King Jr.; his family detested the Ku Klux Klan.

As I write, I look forward to hearing mountain singers Bonnie Loggins and Mary Lomax, down from Habersham County. Octogenarian Mary might sing one of the many old British ballads she knows, and if she's up to it, her nonagenarian sister, Bonnie, will sing a song her father, Lemuel Payne, born in 1884, had sung to her:

*I'll drink and be jolly and pass away folly,  
I'll drink it away in a bottle of wine.  
I'll drink it away in full flowing bumper,  
I'll play on my fiddle and pass away time. 🍷*



## ATHENS POTLUCK: PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON THRASHER

The series *Athens Potluck* is focused on the wildly diverse music scene of Athens, Georgia. Jason Thrasher selected the first musician for the series, Laura Carter of Elf Power and the Orange Twin collective, then photographed her and asked her five questions. Laura selected W. Cullen Hart, of Olivia Tremor Control (whose studio is pictured here), and posed her questions to him. Hart chose Julian Koster of Neutral Milk Hotel, and so on. Thrasher photographs each musician at home. Their answers to the questions are displayed on vinyl records, album covers, books, and in works of art.

—BETH HALL THRASHER

*Athens Potluck is on view at the Georgia Theatre in downtown Athens.*



## PHELAN LAVELLE (SHADE; CRUNCHY)

I was in a band called Bird Names in Chicago and a dude of some renown in Athens had taken a shine to our particular melee of weird crap-pop. He invited us on tour with one of his many projects, Quiet Hooves, a band that seemed to hold an insular, specific celebrity in Athens—when I mention them now, only a few years later, people either wet their pants like fanatics or have not a clue as to who they were. So we hit the road together, sharing vans, old Peavey equipment, inside jokes, and a variety of cigs and snacks. Naturally, they booked a show in Athens. Coming into Quiet Hooves' hometown with them was like when you have a burn and it gets close to heat, the throb of proximity to the mothership. I moved here within a year.



# THE COS-MO-POL-I-TAN SOUND

VIC CHESNUTT, THE GREATEST

by

Patterson Hood

I moved to Athens on April Fools' Day, 1994. By then, I had been writing songs and more or less living a life obsessed with music for about twenty years. Based on just one afternoon and evening spent there, I felt this place calling to me. Starting in the early eighties, the town had built a reputation as a mecca for bands and, for better or worse, had helped formulate the "alternative" genre. *SPIN* and *Rolling Stone* had written up the Athens scene, and someone even made a movie about it. R.E.M. was the biggest band in the world. But by the

time I landed there, to most outsiders Athens's glory days were already in the rearview mirror and the hype and media attention had moved on to other "scene towns" like Seattle and Chapel Hill. It was their loss. As I immediately discovered, Athens in the nineties was a vibrant and amazing place of gigantic artistic diversity—in a town of fewer than 100,000 there were probably more than three-hundred bands, making a wide range of different types of music, and doing a lot of it very well.

A local songwriter named Jack Logan >>



Photograph of Vic Chesnutt by Jem Cohen



SARA CAMPBELL

(L.A.-BASED WRITER)

It's 1996. My friend and I are slinging down Pabsts and watching Fred Schneider speak-sing to a few dozen amused onlookers at the 40 Watt. Bored and looking for something to do, we'd read in *Flagpole* that he was stopping in Athens on the tour supporting his new solo record, *Just Fred*.

I hadn't been to the 40 Watt many times, though I'd heard tales. Secret R.E.M. shows performed under preposterous pseudonyms. Southern Culture on the Skids throwing buckets of fried chicken at the audience. A Man or Astro-Man? show where the entire crowd sported alien costumes. All great fun, but intimidating to a nineteen-year-old who was fresh out of the dorms by way of suburbia.

*Just Fred* was produced by Steve Albini, and it bore all the grunge flourishes you'd expect from his mid-nineties output, thrown over the unmistakable Fred-ness of Fred. Though I'd never seen him live, he managed to eclipse every expectation of outré performance, flamboyant dress, and Dionysian flourish I could have imagined. Was the show transcendent? Not exactly. Memorable? Oh yes.

What I hadn't yet realized about Athens is one of the key markers of its brilliance—that night, no one seemed out of place. B-52's groupies. Fred Schneider appreciators. Townies and friends of the band. Rednecks. Randoms looking for a dark place to drink and drown out the noise in their heads. And us, lowly undergrads, barely half-formed and guided only by our need to be a part of the night, trying different scenes and sounds on for size.





## JUSTIN GAGE

### (AQUARIUM DRUNKARD)

Prior to my buying into the heathen bargain that is Los Angeles, I grew up in a wooded suburb of Atlanta about sixty miles from Athens. It was there, when I was a kid in the eighties, that the myth and magic of the Classic City began to take hold. The town had lore. The kind that was passed down from friends' older brothers home on holiday breaks. A lore imbued via their stories and cassettes filled with mixes of bands I'd never heard of: R.E.M. playing house parties in Normaltown; the old 40 Watt. It seemed inclusive, yet exotic, close and very far away. Pylon, Love Tractor, Squalls, Flat Duo Jets, the B-52's.

By the time I was sixteen, in the early nineties, Athens felt like a mecca, even more so after my friends and I began making the trek to see shows on weekends, crashing on couches, and drinking underage where we could (usually Sky's Place, RIP).

I moved to Athens in 1995 under the guise of attending school. My real intention was to take in as much music and associated ephemera as possible. And there was a lot of it, and plenty of spaces to find it. Vic Chesnutt, the Elephant 6 Collective, Bloodkin, the Star Room Boys, Five Eight, Macha, Hayride, Panic, DBT. All were active. Six months into my residency, I found a job at a record store downtown. In hindsight, that gig, in that town, formed my musical tastes and DNA.

It's presently 97 degrees in Los Angeles—in mid-October—and all I can think about are the leaves falling in Normaltown on Prince in front of the Grit. And damn, don't I miss it.

released an album called *Bulk* with more than forty songs on it, each like a short story, to critical acclaim. The band Five Eight seemed to be on the verge of breaking through to worldwide recognition. Meanwhile, Athens musicians like Ben Mize and David Barbe were touring internationally as part of major bands like Counting Crows and Sugar. Around town, Bill Doss, Andrew Rieger, Jeff Mangum, and a collective of other like-minded artists were collaborating in bands like Olivia Tremor Control, Elf Power, and Neutral Milk Hotel. Before long they created a scene unto itself known worldwide as Elephant 6.

In the summer of 1995, I took a job as a sound engineer at a local club called the High Hat, granting me a bird's-eye view of many of the best musicians in town. From my literal perch in the sound booth overlooking the room, I saw great live music five nights a week. On nights that I wasn't working, I was out at the 40 Watt Club or the Atomic or later Tasty World, immersing myself in the glorious music scene of my adopted hometown. I was broke and living in a dive, but I was writing songs nearly every day, laying the groundwork for the band of my dreams.

It was around that time that I first saw and heard Vic Chesnutt. I walked into the 40 Watt not really knowing anything about him or his music. Upon moving to town, I had heard over and over that I needed to see Vic and that he was "the best songwriter in Athens." I didn't know his work, I didn't know what he looked like or even that he was in a wheelchair. That night will always go down as one of the most transcendent live music experiences of my life. He came onstage with what he referred to as his "scared little skiffle band," rolled up to the front, and proceeded to sing and play some stunning songs. There was a naked beauty in his music that drew me in and tore me apart. I ended up on the front row with my mouth agape and tears streaming down my face.

**I'VE OFTEN SAID THAT** Vic Chesnutt was the best songwriter of my generation; someday there will be classes at fine colleges devoted to the study of his songs. I realize that the "best of" declaration can be a turnoff and that I sound

like a snake oil salesman claiming his craft makes one feel more alive. Added to the relative obscurity of Vic's life's work, such proselytizing could be taken as elitist drivel. That is, if the subject were not of such awe-inspiring talent in an unlikely package.

Vic Chesnutt is not a household name. He had a small following at the height of his acclaim. His music would be considered an acquired taste, even at its most accessible, and he was so prolific that it's daunting to explore his large number of releases. He simply released more music than people could keep up with, solo and in collaboration with others, often on small (and sometimes now-defunct) labels.

Vic's writing was so free. He would make choruses and hooks out of things most people would never think to fit into the song form. His art was all encompassing, freely mixing the high- and lowbrow, the beautiful and profane. He could use his Southern drawl to make short words long and fit the most complex of thoughts into an almost childlike melody. From "Onion Soup": *Those were the days, when you were so cos-mo-pol-i-tan / These are the days, my letters they're increasingly maudlin.* Vic was willing and able to rhyme "A hotel full of Pakistanis" and "a front porch filled with greasy, greasy grannies." For me, it was love at first sight.

In "Soft Picasso," one of my all-time favorite songs, he told the tale of a friend's comeuppance upon the realization that the sexual revolution could work both ways. The twists and turns of the verses are followed by a knockout left hook of a chorus punch line, all delivered with Vic's deadpan drawl and a deceptively complex melody. It's not his best song, but it's better than nearly anyone else's best song.

What is Vic's best song? That's a tough one. It could be "Isadora Duncan," the stunning opener to his debut album, *Little*. An ace card to open any hand, it's a near-perfect gem of a song with a vicious central line: *I can't believe you own this attitude.* Or it could be another from the same album, "Speed Racer," wherein he lays bare his injury and defiant outlook:

*I'm not a victim.  
I'm not a victim.  
I am an atheist.  
I am an atheist.  
The idea of divine order is essentially crazy.  
Laws of action and reaction are the closest  
thing to truth in the universe.*

Reconciling this earned worldview with the one he inherited growing up in the Bible Belt >>



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## **What do you do next?**

If you're Bonnie Bishop, after you've caught your breath, collected your Grammy, and thanked Bonnie Raitt for recording "Not Cause I Wanted To," you start earning your MFA in Creative Nonfiction at the Sewanee School of Letters. It's the innovative, summers-only graduate program in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of the South, where Bonnie is pursuing what she has always seen as her real vocation. "Most people know me as just a singer-songwriter," she explains, "but the truth is I've always been a storyteller, with or without my guitar. After 13 years on the road, I feel the need to get back to the heart of my creativity."

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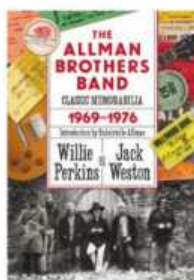
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came at a high emotional, and sometimes physical, price. There is a moment in Peter Sillen’s wonderful 1994 documentary short film, *Speed Racer: Welcome to the World of Vic Chesnutt*, in which the poet John Seawright recounts seeing Vic perform at a Unitarian church with Vic’s family in attendance. After singing the lines above, John says, Vic apologized to them all, but especially to his granny. It is a heartbreaking story of Vic’s conviction but also his kindness.

Vic was raised in a Christian home in Zebulon, Georgia. He was adopted by loving parents. His father, James, worked as a luggage handler for Eastern Airlines and his mother, Marian, was a clerk at the immigration office in Atlanta. Vic was very close to his grandparents. The colloquialisms in his wordplay could likely be traced back to all the time spent with old Georgian men and women. There is no doubt he spent many hours as a child going to church. But instead of discovering himself there, he began to find his place in the world by playing music. Vic dabbled in songwriting and played guitar in various bands before the car crash that, at eighteen, left him mostly paralyzed from the neck down with only partial use of his arms and hands.

After the wreck he initially couldn’t play the guitar so he threw himself into his songwriting. He was influenced by the poetry of Wallace Stevens, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and Stevie Smith. Vic turned inward with a vengeance and reinvented himself. He made his disability a platform from which to provoke and taunt, to rail against hypocrisy and complacency.

A few years later—while tripping on acid, he claimed—he discovered a way to once again play the guitar. He glued a pick to a special glove he rigged up for his right hand that enabled him to strum, while special tunings allowed him to make simple chords with his left. His instinct for music technique was undiminished, so he persevered, making up for his physical limitations by drawing on his vast chordal knowledge.

After moving to Athens in 1985, Vic was discovered playing solo at the 40 Watt Club by Michael Stipe, who produced his first two albums. After that, he made some fifteen more, including collaborations with such varied entities as Widespread Panic, Elf Power, Thee Silver Mt. Zion Memorial Orchestra, Van Dyke Parks, Guy Picciotto, Ham I, Jonathan Richman, and Lambchop. In 1990, he married Tina Whatley. She was a devoted companion as well as musical collaborator.

On record, he pursued a restless fervor with a lack of compromise to the varying fashions of

the day. Onstage he could be fearless and antagonistic, sometimes gloriously great and sometimes train-wreck terrible—but never boring. (Vic with a nylon string guitar is punk-rock incarnate.) The one constant above all else was the top-shelf quality of the songwriting.

Talk about playing it like you feel it—for him, every chord or note was an agonizingly painful and herculean act. Getting around was no small task either. Just playing locally had to be a feat of triumph over adversity, but Vic was a road-dog till the end, logging tour after tour all over the world, navigating airports and venues in a schedule that even I would find grueling.

**I FIRST MET VIC** shortly after that transcendent experience in his audience at the 40 Watt, during my tenure at the High Hat, where I had the good fortune of working several of his shows, including the memorable album-release night for *About to Choke*. He came onstage and basically disavowed the album he was there to promote.

A year or so later, I mixed a show for Brute (wherein Vic was backed by the Athens band Widespread Panic), which culminated with a completely irony-free cover of Olivia Newton-John's "Have You Never Been Mellow." It was soul singing at its finest, with Vic so taken by the moment that he seemed to be levitating above his wheelchair. I was standing in the booth grinning from ear to ear during a song that I had always hated.

It was some years later when I got to know Vic better and our friendship was forged. We were both booked to play a Christmas benefit that Jay Farrar was putting on in St. Louis. The plan was for Vic and me to be on the same flight from Atlanta. I would rent a car and he would ride with me from airport to hotel, from hotel to show. Vic seemed embarrassed for me to be helping him, but I was honored. There was snow on the ground and it had never occurred to me how treacherous even a small amount could be for a paraplegic, lest he get frostbite and not immediately know it. Vic didn't drink anymore but loved to smoke a joint or two. I procured a small amount and after the show several of us had a wonderful late night hang at the hotel, listening to Pink Floyd's *Animals* on repeat on an iPod dock and laughing hysterically as Vic held court.

Vic's voice was an instrument in itself. Not beautiful in the traditional or technical sense, it was highly expressive, the perfect vehicle for the songs he wrote. His songs had a conversational quality about them that I have always aimed for in my own writing, and at the same time his speaking voice had a sing-song quality about it that was >>

## BOB SLEPPY (NUÇI'S SPACE)

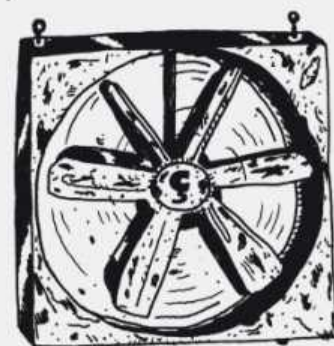
It was a few minutes before 9:00 on a Monday morning when I heard a knock on the front door at Nuçi's Space. We typically don't open until after ten, and musicians rarely arrive before noon to rehearse. I casually left my desk and walked to the front door to find a familiar face standing outside on the patio. "You're here early," I said, welcoming the young man into the building. He replied, "My roommate just left the house and I didn't want to be alone." We made our way back to my desk, where I share an open office with my coworkers, and one of them asked the man how he was doing that morning. "Not so good," he said timidly. "I just need to be around other people right now." Without any hesitation, my coworker offered to sit with him on the big overstuffed couch in the common area.

Nuçi Phillips arrived in Athens in 1992 to finish his undergraduate degree. A talented guitarist and songwriter, he quickly became immersed in the local music scene. After a couple years, he thought about recording some of his songs and contacted engineer and producer David Barbe. They developed a friendship and planned Nuçi's first album.

In November 1996, as his recording work wound down, Nuçi began to feel the presence of an unwelcome companion. He had been diagnosed with clinical depression five years earlier, and despite the loving support of his family, access to high-quality treatment, and a keen understanding of his illness, he continued to struggle. On Thanksgiving Day in 1996, while alone in his Athens apartment, Nuçi Phillips took his own life. Within the liner notes of Nuçi's posthumously released album, *Only When the Right Side Glows*, Barbe described him as "a combination of brilliance and fragility . . . someone lost in an impermeable zone of release."

Following her son's death, Linda Phillips conceived of a place where people—particularly musicians—in Athens who suffered from mental illnesses could go for accessible treatment and support. We opened the doors to Nuçi's Space in September 2000. Our top priority is to create and maintain a safe, stable, and supportive environment to promote the emotional, physical, and professional well-being of Athens's musicians. We offer access to healthcare services, and our building has four soundproof practice rooms and a common area with a raised stage for performances. In the summer, we host a day camp for kids that includes both professional music instruction and self-esteem training. Since its inception, Nuçi's Space has provided access to mental health services for almost two thousand musicians in our community and subsidized more than twenty-five-thousand appointments with mental health professionals.

Throughout the day, I checked in on the young man at the Space. I saw him quietly read a book or listen to music on his headphones, or engage the staff in conversation. I even saw him welcome guests. Compared to just a few hours earlier, he seemed comfortable and at peace. We knew that the fire burning inside his mind was still present, but he was able to control it for another day. As the day came to an end, the man walked back to the office to say good-bye and offer his sincere thanks. Someone said, "You're volunteering here tomorrow, right?" The man cracked a smile. "Yeah, I'll be here," he said. "I'll definitely be here."





distinctly musical when he spoke. As John Jeremiah Sullivan wrote of Vic in this magazine in 1997, “Maybe not since Dylan Thomas dropped dead of an insult to the brain has anyone squeezed so much meaning out of the *sound* of English.”

My band shared a bill with him once at a crowded showcase at South by Southwest. The show was a disorganized mess, with too many bands sharing too small a stage, along with the usual technical difficulties associated with such things. I can remember Vic working through a particularly long soundcheck. At one point, the soundman asked him if he was happy. “I’m not happy,” Vic sardonically replied without skipping a beat. “But it *sounds* all right.”

It’s well known that Vic attempted suicide several times; even his car wreck was shrouded in some speculation about intent. He was open and candid about his struggles with depression, which fueled much of his work, the same way his inspirational defiance did in his better times. He referred to the song “Flirted with You All My Life”—another candidate for his very best—as his breakup song with suicide. That it appeared on his final album is perhaps ironic, or perhaps not. To know and love Vic was to accept him as he was, as he was always militantly his own man.

On Christmas morning, 2009, Vic Chesnutt passed away from an overdose of muscle relaxants. His loss tore the heart out of so many people in our shared town. At home, my wife and I worked hard to conceal our sadness from our four-year-old daughter. After she opened her presents, I took a brief opportunity to slip away into a back room to write a song to try and deal with my overflowing emotions. “Sitting in the Sunshine (Thinking About the Rain)” is so far unrecorded, but it enabled me to get through that day. Perhaps that unto itself is a fitting tribute to an artist whose songwriting enabled him to live for so long.

A few weeks after Vic’s passing, many of his favorite artists gathered at the 40 Watt Club to pay tribute. I witnessed two unsurpassed evenings of beautiful music, mostly Vic’s songs, lovingly performed by a wide range of artists, local and otherwise, for a packed house.

Later, I collaborated on another song with Kelly Hogan. She and Vic were close friends and one of his last songs had been for the solo record she was working on. After he died, she wrote a stream-of-consciousness poem for him and asked me to help adapt it into a song for her album. The song took too long to finish to make her album, so I asked her if I could put it on the record I was working on. “Come Back Little Star,” which featured a guest vocal by

Kelly, was the standout track on my album *Heat Lightning Rumbles in the Distance*. “This town got blown to tatters / When you traded in your wheels for wings.”

In the years since Vic’s passing, everyone who loved him has had to figure out their own ways to deal with the loss. Some of our friends say they can’t play his records yet; it just makes them too sad. For me, it’s been the opposite. I will

always mourn that he’s gone and that we can’t go see him play, or laugh at his beautifully perverse sense of the world. But we can take solace in the immense gift he left us. For Vic, a lot of life must have been a nearly unbearable pain, but he endured it for so long in order to create these beautiful works of art and we can still visit him by playing those wonderful songs—songs that I feel make up an afterlife Vic could believe in. 🐣

## “SITTING IN THE SUNSHINE (THINKING ABOUT THE RAIN)”

LYRICS BY PATTERSON HOOD, FOR VIC CHESNUTT

*I’m not happy but it sounds all right  
Not much that you can do to make my outlook bright  
It’s just gonna take a while to chase these blues away  
But I appreciate you stopping over anyway  
Cuz I always look forward to the things you say  
and the way you choose to say them*

*I’m not defeated I’m just hanging low  
You’ve been sitting here beside me long enough to know  
That I always have a surliness to guide me through  
and I put my disposition in everything I do  
If we cut it into plastic then I promise you  
you can be the first to play it*

*If I’m sitting in the sunshine  
I’ll be thinking about the rain  
But I long to have you beside me  
Just the same*

*Not surrendering I’m just too tired to fight  
I’m still hungry for a win but lost my appetite  
I’m not mistaking your attentions for an easy play  
Not forsaking all those mentions that you’ve brought my way  
And a laugh to cut the tensions of this winter day  
and the nights that always follow*

*If I’m parked out in your driveway  
Will you leave your porch light on  
This empty seat beside me  
Needs you on it*

*I’m not happy don’t guess I ever was  
But I’ve made the most of something that just never was  
And I gave the darker moments one hell of a chase  
And I’ve kept a sense of humor through my darkest days  
We pretend that it’s not ending, just some passing phase  
Like the light that’s passing through it*

*Sitting in the sunshine, thinking about the rain  
I long to have you beside me  
Just the same*

## ORT BY JASON THRASHER

**W**illiam Orten Carlton, aka Ort, is perhaps best known for his role as storyteller in the 1987 documentary *Athens, GA: Inside/Out*. Ort can also be found occasionally spinning oldies on WUOG (90.5 FM) and serving as special correspondent on craft beer and obscure 45s for *Flagpole Magazine*. When Ort recently got into trouble with the city for his overabundant “outdoor collection,” the Athens community rallied with an online auction of the photograph pictured here and raised enough money to sort through Ort’s things and pay his fines. After the ordeal, Ort remarked that he was relieved to find a few great records he’d been missing for decades.

—BETH HALL THRASHER



CINDY  
WILSON  
(B-52'S)



**W**e played our first show at Julia and Grey’s house on Valentine’s Day in 1977, but we only had about four or five songs so we had to repeat the set. Before the party, Kate went out and bought us both these big white wigs—there were matching pocketbooks that came with them. We were just having fun, so we wore that. And when we came on that night, people were so into it, everything totally clicked. Everybody was dancing. The party was in this old house, and the floors were bouncing up and down and the whole house was shaking from the dancing. I met my future husband that night. I started my career and I met my husband at the same party. It was totally crazy.



THAYER  
SARRANO  
(SINGER/SONGWRITER)

**I**t’s summertime. I am in the sound booth at Nuçi’s Space watching the annual Camp Amped Grand Finale, the final performance at the rock camp for teens where I work as a counselor. It feels like the whole town has packed in for the show: proud families; club owners; Athens musicians who are young, seasoned, jaded. Every generation is watching the stage. And the campers are killing it! One camper who was painfully shy on her first day is now taking a solo, belting “Freedom!” from Aretha Franklin’s “Think.” The campers close with the Beastie Boys’ “Sabotage,” tripping out with delay and strobe lights, and I see the Georgia Theatre’s soundman and lighting designer high five each other after the song’s epic ending. These guys have taken off on a Saturday night, donated their time and talents, and helped make this rock moment. There is so much generosity, no pretension. While nights like these are not uncommon here, we do not take them for granted.



# "I GOTTA MOVE HERE. WE SHOULD START A BAND AND DO THIS."



**MICHAEL LACHOWSKI** is a founding member of the seminal art-rock band Pylon, formed in Athens in 1978. **GRAHAM ULICNY** is the front man for contemporary Athens band Reptar, formed in 2009. In August, Michael called Graham to talk about the evolution of the city's music scene.

**MICHAEL:** The most interesting thing to me is that both of our bands were kind of "it bands" representing Athens and, therefore, ambassadors for Athens. For us, it was just a total shock that we could've come from a small town in Georgia. Because back then, there wasn't much of that except the B-52's.



**MICHAEL STIPE**  
(R.E.M.)

**W**hat's important to any ongoing scene is having venues like the Go Bar and the Caledonia, and a yearly festival like Slingshot, that encourage and support burgeoning local acts and offer them venues to perform in and hone their vision and sound.

**GRAHAM:** By the time we were on tour, we had people coming to our shows *because* we were from Athens. That has everything to do with when y'all were playing, starting the scene that y'all started. You know, it's just a tiny town. Most people have never been there. But now people have heard the records, so there's an expectation.

**MICHAEL:** Well, Pylon still had some of that, even though there was only one band that came before us, and they'd already left Athens by the time we formed. When we went places, our little card of introduction was basically one or two phone calls by somebody in the B-52's. And then it was just zip, zip, zip—real easy to get people in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia to book us. But the fact that we were from Athens never ceased to be an amazing talking point.

**GRAHAM:** When we first went on tour and we'd do interviews, the first question was usually, "What is it even like?" Because I think it's hard to imagine. Before I moved to Athens I had that same idea: there's all of this disparate, amazing music emanating from this weird little city in Georgia. It's really cool to have that. If you're a band from New York or something, you can't claim that.

**MICHAEL:** We definitely got asked all kinds of questions like: "How could this be happening? What is in the water?"

**GRAHAM:** The first show I saw there was Kuruma playing a house show in a purple house over by the train tracks. People were going insane and dancing. And it was nasty and weird—almost a haunted house-looking zone—and I was just like, "I gotta move here. We should start a band and do this."

**MICHAEL:** How do you feel about the music scene in Athens right now?

**GRAHAM:** It's way more interesting and way more vital than it was when we were first playing. There's so much diversity now. There's so much good music, it's wild. A lot of folks who make it to Athens—especially if they're going to school there and grew up in a super-boring suburb of Atlanta—more than likely come and just have fun. They find a place where they can express themselves.

**MICHAEL:** I've been worrying that there have been too many changes in Athens—the fertility of super-creativity for its own sake was harder and harder to imagine, but it sounds like it's happening again.

**GRAHAM:** Really, there's this lineage starting with y'all. Pylon and that group of bands has become its own institution—people come for that, I think. Some of my favorite folks there, and some of my favorite musicians there, definitely came after living in a bunch of other places and then settled in Athens. It's just a good place to be creative. 🐔





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## Prayers for Richard

BY  
DAVID RAMSEY

*And there appeared  
a great wonder in heaven*

\*\*\*

Little Richard has always been attuned to signs. At the height of his fame, on tour in Australia in October 1957, he saw a big ball of fire in the sky above the stadium. This was his second vision of fire. On the flight over, the glow of the engines appeared to him as flames and he pictured yellow-haired angels holding the plane aloft.

The message, to Little Richard, was clear. He had to leave show business, quit singing the devil's music, and get right with God.

"It looked as though the big ball of fire came directly over the stadium about two or three hundred feet above our heads," he later told his biographer, Charles White. "It shook my mind. . . . I got up from the piano and said, 'This is it. I am through. I am leaving show business to go back to God.'" And he did. He ditched the tour—leaving half a million dollars' worth

of canceled bookings, with multiple lawsuits to come. The change in plans kept him off a scheduled flight that crashed into the Pacific Ocean. The Lord wasn't messing around.

Little Richard quit rock & roll altogether, at least for a time. He enrolled at Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama, to study to become a minister. All to the despair of the money men at Specialty Records—owner Art Rupe said that Little Richard was so popular they could have recorded him blowing his nose and made a hit.

What Little Richard saw overhead in Australia was in fact Sputnik, the Russian satellite traveling 18,000 miles an hour in the night sky.

Picture Little Richard, far from home, drenched in sweat. "He made an impressive entry," according to Australian newspaper the *Age*, "wearing a brilliant red coat over a canary yellow suit, topped off with a bright green turban. But he discarded all the trimmings until he was left with only pyjama pants and the turban." Pounding on the piano and then dancing on top of it and then throwing his bedazzled clothes into the crowd. And Richard saw the bright yellow burn of the satellite, or probably the rocket casing trailing it, perhaps streaking past the vibrant Alpha and Beta Centauri stars of the Southern Cross.

A star who mistook a satellite for a ball of fire. And we might pause here to note that whether or not it was a message from God, something like a miracle was afoot. A freaky-deaky bisexual black man who grew up poor in the Jim Crow South in Macon, Georgia, singing a wild, sexy nonsense song that changed music forever, everywhere—even in a packed stadium halfway around the world, as shrieking Australian teenagers nearly started a riot, scuffling to touch the man's discarded clothes. Fire in the heavens and fire on earth.

There are miracles everywhere if you know where to look. And know how to listen: *A wop-bop-a-loo-mop-a-lop-bam-boom!*

\*\*\*

*And the Word was made flesh,  
and dwelt among us*

\*\*\*

Little Richard was born Richard Wayne Penniman in Macon in 1932, the third of twelve children. His daddy, Bud Penniman, was a church deacon and a bootlegger and a club owner. God, sin, and music. Bud met Richard's mother, Leva Mae, at a Seventh-day Adventist holy meeting when she was thirteen. After a year of courtship, the couple married. Leva Mae meant to name her third child Ricardo, but there was a mistake on the birth certificate. "I never had sus enough to check it out and make 'em straighten it up right," she said. And so he was Richard.

He was born with his right leg shorter than his left. His limp made him look like he was sashaying when he walked, and the kids called him faggot, sissy, freak, punk. He felt more like a girl than a boy, he said later, and used to imitate his mother putting powder on her face.

When he was a child, a lady in town put the "bad-mouth" on Richard, a curse that he would die at twenty-one. "I always believed that," he told his biographer. "But it just made me wilder."

Richard's career as a traveling musician—and his life as a sexually adventurous, gender-bending wild man—started in his teenage years. He experimented with men in the gay underworld in Macon, guys named Madame Oop and Sis Henry and Bro Boy, as well as with older women.



At sixteen, Richard had a falling out with his father over his sexuality—Bud told him he was “half a son.” He left home to join a traveling medicine show literally selling snake oil; he would sing Louis Jordan’s “Caldonia,” the only tune he knew that wasn’t a church song. He joined up with various other traveling bands, sometimes performing in drag as Princess Lavonne. One group, B. Brown and His Orchestra, named him Little Richard.

After years on the chitlin’ circuit, Little Richard got a break with Specialty Records, which brought him to Cosimo Matassa’s J&M Studio in New Orleans in 1955, in the back of an appliance store on Rampart Street. And here, in the history of American music, by accident or fate, the contingencies aligned just so. “I created rock & roll, didn’t even know what I was doing,” Richard said.

In the studio, Specialty’s producer Bumps Blackwell found a wild-dressing, wild-talking man with his hair waved up half a foot. But Blackwell thought that the first tracks they recorded were too mild, too milquetoast, especially for a guy whose stage act was famously outlandish and untamed. “If you look like Tarzan and sound like Mickey Mouse it just doesn’t

work out,” Blackwell later explained.

They went to take a break at the Dew Drop Inn on LaSalle Street. Out of the studio, Little Richard immediately started hamming it up for the scattering of daytime drunks. “Boosters, rounders, pimps, whores was hanging around,” Blackwell said. “That’s all you gotta do is give Richard an audience.” He went to the piano and banged out a raunchy ode to sodomy that he used to play at the dodgier clubs on the circuit: “A wop bop a loo mop / A good goddamn / Tutti Frutti / Good booty / If it don’t fit / Don’t force it / You can grease it / Make it easy.”

And a *good goddamn*, thought Bumps Blackwell—now *that* is what I need to get on record. Blackwell brought in a local songwriter, Dorothy LaBostrie, to write some family-friendly lyrics. “Good booty” became “aw rutti,” and then there was a girl named Sue and a gal named Daisy.

LaBostrie delivered the words with just fifteen minutes of studio time left, and that was all it took. This was the Little Richard they called “War Hawk” in church because of his hollering and screaming. This was the Little Richard who used to bang on tin cans and wail as a boy; one of his brothers remembered, “I thought he couldn’t sing, anyway, just a *noise*.” The Little

Richard whose protégé, Jimi Hendrix, would later say that he wanted to do with his guitar what Richard did with his voice. This was the freak, the circus showman, the vamping diva, the Holy Ghost. He sounds breathless and fierce, a little unhinged. He sounds like the last man on earth singing the first song ever written.

The bubblegum lyrics don’t change the urgency of the song, barely contain the sex and fury and fun. Nonsense can deliver a perfectly coherent message depending on the way you say it. And, *wooo*, how he said it. Like a preacher speaking, lasciviously, in tongues.

\*\*\*

*You have turned my mourning  
into dancing for me*

\*\*\*

Little Richard, now eighty-two years old, has reportedly been living the last several years in a penthouse suite at the Hilton hotel in downtown Nashville (the Hilton will neither confirm nor deny that they have a guest named Mr. Penniman). Most Nashvillians I’ve talked to have no

Little Rock's culinary scene is on the rise, and it's a food lover's paradise. From farmers' markets and locally-owned restaurants, to its artisanal food scene with breweries, distillery and wineries, there was something to enjoy everywhere we went. Discover the city's local flavors and find your favorites in Little Rock.

Learn about our city's breweries, distillery and wineries > To see more, visit [LittleRock.com](http://LittleRock.com)

idea, although a local country singer told me he once happened to spot Richard sitting in the passenger seat of his black stretch Cadillac Escalade, the window cracked. He shouted out Little Richard's name and Richard rolled down the window to say, "God bless you," and hand him a book of prayers.

Richard doesn't get out on the town much. He has been confined to a wheelchair since hip surgery in 2009 that he says went awry. Here's how he explained it last summer in a rare public appearance, at Nashville's Wildhorse Saloon, where he was honored at a luncheon hosted by the National Museum of African American Music:

"I came to Nashville to see my sister. I bought a home for me and her here in the hills. And I went in for surgery on my hip. I was walking on my way in but I couldn't walk out. The hip surgery was really bad for me. I haven't walked since. I'm in pain twenty-four hours a day. I have never seen nothing like it."

I knew someone who knew someone who had Little Richard's cell phone number, and in June, I cold-called him. To my surprise, he picked up. He was kind but adamant about not doing an interview. He told me about his hip, about how much pain he was in. "People have been calling me from all over the world," he said. "But I haven't been doing any interviews, I've been refusing all of them. I'll be eighty-three on December 5. The Lord has blessed me to still be alive."

He told me about the event at the Wildhorse a week later and I decided to show up. He wouldn't be performing or anything—I believe him when he says he won't ever be performing again—but, well, I just wanted to *see* him. When he was a boy, people in Macon thought Richard was a healer. The Beatles, when they first met him, kept wanting to touch his hands. Think of the teenage fans who used to fight over his clothes. Or offer up their own: a Little Richard concert in Baltimore in 1956 is supposedly the first incident of female fans throwing their underwear onstage ("a shower of panties," a bandmate remembered).

It was around eleven in the morning when the Escalade rolled past the honky-tonks on Broadway and turned down Second Avenue to the Wildhorse. Downtown Nashville in the morning is strange—the honky-tonks have opened for the early-bird tourists, cover bands playing Hank and Elvis and Jerry Lee. But the neon lights aren't on yet, so the reds, pinks, and purples are dingy and dim.

Richard's entourage, four men dressed in suits and Secret Service shades, made quick work, lifting Richard out of the passenger seat, into his wheelchair, and onto the red carpet. The whole operation looked like a kidnapping in reverse.

Little Richard wore a paisley jacket with a

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psychedelic floral pattern over a polka-dot button-up shirt, a pompadour hairpiece, rhinestone boots, and gold sunglasses, which he never removed. I can report to you, readers, that the self-proclaimed king *and* queen of rock & roll looked fabulous.

He also looked, of course, like an octogenarian, a little bit frail. He was in a surly mood when he arrived because the whole red carpet thing presented a problem. He did not want to be photographed in a wheelchair. "I really don't want anyone seeing me like this," he said.

By the time he received his award, he was in better spirits. He told stories about the old days in Nashville, playing gigs as a teenager at the New Era Club, sleeping at the YMCA because the white hotels wouldn't let him in. He had his bodyguards hand out copies of a book, *Finding Peace Within*, to members of the audience. "Y'all keep me in your prayers," he said.

After the Wildhorse, I talked to Richard a few more times briefly on the phone; he was always polite but wouldn't budge on the topic of an interview. "I've been going through a lot of pain and stuff and it ain't worth it to me," he said.

The last time we spoke, he told me, "I'm really not interested in that kind of thing right now,

baby. I've been real sick. I'm sick, I'm really trying to get well, baby." He checked to make sure I had gotten the book he handed out and made me promise that I would read it.

Music fans are insatiable. The records are not enough. We are historians, anthropologists, archivists, psychologists. Little Richard is not just a legend but one of the last people alive among that first wave of rock & roll, the prime movers and shakers. So it is probably inevitable to treat Richard Penniman like a public treasure. If Richard is gracious, if he keeps thanking God simply that he is still alive, we are gracious, too. Every minute that he remains on this earth feels precious. Start the tape recorders, aim the cameras.

But there comes a day when what we want and need from our legends no longer jibes with what fragile human beings have to give. When bodies break down. In 1964, when folklorists found the legendary country blues singer Skip James, dying of stomach cancer in a charity hospital in Tunica, Mississippi, they begged him to play again. James supposedly answered, "I don't know. Skippy tired."

If Richard had granted an interview, what would I have asked? Not about the pain, which is probably all he can think about and all he wants

to talk about. The old stories—Sister Rosetta Tharpe at the Macon City Auditorium, Miss Ann and the Tick-Tock Club, the Beatles, the Stones, the gospel songs with Quincy Jones, the years preaching as an evangelist, Vegas, Pancake 31 makeup, the "wonderful orgies" (his words) and the threesome with Buddy Holly, angel dust and cocaine, a signifying satellite in outer space—he's told those tales a million times, and maybe there's nothing much more to tell. What is fresh and vital and constant is the pain.

Keep Little Richard in your prayers. Praise and thanksgiving. And intercession too. May he find comfort and ease. May he find a little more of that old rhythm, a little more of that wild light.

The book that Richard hands out is a collection of Bible verses, along with a modernized version of Ellen G. White's *Steps to Christ*. White was a cofounder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the nineteenth century after she had a series of more than a hundred visions, of Jesus and of yellow-haired angels.

The last line in the book: "And there is joy in heaven in the presence of God and the holy angels over one soul redeemed, a joy that is expressed in songs of holy triumph."

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*And there shall be signs in the sun,  
and in the moon, and in the stars*

A different sort of troublemaker, Martin Luther, wrote in a letter to a friend in 1530, “Whenever the devil harasses you thus, seek the company of men, or drink more, or joke and talk nonsense, or do some other merry thing. Sometimes we must drink more, sport, recreate ourselves, aye, and even sin a little to spite the devil, so that we leave him no place for troubling our consciences with trifles.”

Richard was often torn between his life as a Christian and his life as a rock & roll sinner. “I would get up off an orgy and go pick up my Bible,” he once explained. “Sometimes I would have the Bible right by me.”

During one spell as an evangelist, he preached that “this kind of music is demonic.” Certainly, if you watch videos of Little Richard performing, he looks something like possessed. But the spirit he found, the way we move to Little Richard songs, must be a holy thing. Beyond boogie: the ecstatic mode, to spite the devil.

At the Wildhorse in Nashville, Richard told the crowd: “I just want y’all also to know that Jesus is coming soon. I’m serious. He’s been talking to me and I just want you to know that and remember that something is fixing to happen in this old world. Get closer to God. All of you. Black people and white people. White people, you get closer too. He made you too. Everybody, get closer.”

Richard said something similar at a Recording Academy fund-raiser in Atlanta in 2013. “God talked to me the other night,” he told CeeLo Green, in what might end up being his last interview, and probably the last public appearance in which Little Richard was fully in character as himself. “He said He’s getting ready to come. The world’s getting ready to end . . . and He’s coming, wrapped in flames of fire with a rainbow around his throne.”

When someone in the audience laughed, Richard said: “When I talk to you about God, I’m not playing.”

And who am I to say that Little Richard is wrong? For all of us, actuarially speaking, sooner or later the end is nigh. So let us dance: black and white, man and woman, believer and heathen. And everything in between. Let us dance, all of us, while we are still able, while we still can. 🐦



## Hammer in Her Hand

BY

RACHAEL MADDUX

Beverly “Guitar” Watkins is seventy-six years old. She is wearing house slippers, a hair net, and an Atlanta Hawks t-shirt on backwards. She is probably the greatest living blues guitarist that no one has ever heard of. Today, she is trying to sell her couch. “This couch is *nice*,” she says. Watkins stoops and smacks the button that makes part of it lean and a footrest pop out. “It does that on both sides. It cost four hundred dollars. My son picked it out for me. I’m selling it for two hundred.”

She is trying to sell her couch because she wants to move out of this apartment on the third floor of a seniors-only complex in Atlanta’s Old Fourth Ward neighborhood. Down in the lobby, a gaggle of women her age sit propped up in wheelchairs, their faces lit by daytime TV. Hidden speakers pipe an endless playlist of schmaltzy pop standards into every hallway and common room. It’s a nice enough place, but it’s not her scene.

“I want to be where I can be *free*,” she says. “I live that rock & roll lifestyle.”

Watkins learned to play guitar as a child and began playing professionally while still in high school. In the 1960s, she played on recordings that inspired a generation of white rock & rollers, toured with bands across North America and Europe, opened for Ray Charles and James Brown and B.B. King. She caught the early wave of soul music, crashed on the sandbar of disco, brushed herself off, and kept on going. She reinvented herself as a solo artist at fifty, recorded her first album at sixty, survived multiple brushes with death, and did it all almost completely without celebration, peer, or precedent.

And she’s still doing it. Last Thursday she played her regular gig at Blind Willie’s over in Virginia-Highland. Yesterday she spent all day at one of the two churches where she worships and performs every month. Tuesday she’s play-

ing a memorial birthday party for her cousin Freddie, who died last year. Saturday, the Fourth of July, she’s playing a kids’ soccer game. Sunday afternoon, she and the Meter-Tones, one of her several backing bands, will play to travelers in the atrium of the Atlanta airport. On her days off, she rehearses. Watkins credits her talents to God.

But if God made her good, she made herself great.

Watkins’s phone rings. On the other end is Rob Baskerville, the leader of another one of her backing bands, the King Bees. He’s calling about their upcoming performance at a music festival in Minnesota. There’s the issue of promotion. Watkins’s website and Facebook page haven’t been updated in a while—the most recent post is about her seventy-fourth birthday celebration at Atlanta’s Northside Tavern two Aprils ago. Given her age, the silence raises some questions. “That’s gotta be *done*,” she tells Baskerville. “The people don’t know if I’m dead or alive!”

Beverly Watkins was born in 1939. Her mother died when she was three months old, so she was raised by her grandparents and her mother’s sisters—first in Atlanta, then out in rural Commerce, Georgia, then back in Atlanta. Her grandfather was a sharecropper and played banjo at barn dances. Her aunts Margaret, Bea, and Nell sang in a group called the Hayes Sisters that traveled around, performing at local churches and parties. The voices of Marie Knight and Sister Rosetta Tharpe lived inside the horn of her grandmother’s Victrola. Young Beverly was a mimic, singing and plucking on thin air.

Watkins was eight when her aunt Nell bought her a guitar from the Sears-Roebuck catalog, a child-sized Stella. The first song she taught herself to play was “John Henry.” In high school, she won a talent show playing “Blue Suede Shoes” on that tiny Stella, in the rough, finger-picked style she still employs. By then she’d picked up piano and bass and trumpet, and her school’s bandmaster had noticed her talent. “When he ordered the instruments for the school, he ordered a guitar,” she says—electric, full-sized. “He turned me all the way around.”

The bandmaster got Watkins to play in standard tuning, and then things started happening fast. She’d already been playing bass with a local band called Billy West Stone and the Down Beats. Next she got an audition with Piano Red, a black albino barrelhouse bluesman who’d been playing and recording throughout the South since before Watkins was born.





He'd had a few national hits in the early fifties ("Rockin' with Red," "Red's Boogie") and was looking to tour with some younger folks. During her senior year of high school, Watkins was drafted into his new act as one of three rhythm guitarists.

Dr. Feelgood and the Interns started out playing at clubs and colleges around Atlanta and eventually went national. They signed to Okeh Records, a division of Columbia, and recorded what would become Piano Red's final hits: "Doctor Feel-Good" and "Right String but the Wrong Yo-Yo," a remake of one of his earlier songs. The B-side to 1961's "Doctor Feel-Good" was a song called "Mister Moonlight," written and sung by Roy Lee Johnson, another one of the band's guitarists. The single found favor among young blues-gobbling white musicians, especially in the U.K. Johnny Kidd & the Pirates recorded a cover of "Doctor Feel-Good," and the Merseybeats, the Hollies, and the Beatles all covered "Mister Moonlight."

The tours were exhausting, and not just be-

cause of their schedules. The mid-1960s was a tricky time for a group of black kids to be traveling around America. The band was often booked to play in hotels that didn't allow black guests. In some cities, the group would send Piano Red into a restaurant to order food for the whole band—his pigmentless skin allowed him to pass as, if not white, then at least not black.

As a young black woman, Watkins was in a doubly tricky spot. Sometimes Piano Red's niece Zelda came on tour to keep her company, but otherwise she was the only woman around, in the van and onstage. (The male Interns wore white doctors' coats when they played; she wore a nurse's uniform and hat.) "Piano Red was just like my dad," she says, "and they was like my brothers, all the band members back then. Piano Red said, 'If you all go out anywhere, make sure you take care of Beverly.' And they did. I was very attractive. If somebody would walk up to me, want to talk to me, I'd say, 'Oh yeah, that's my husband right there'—I'd pick somebody in the band." At twenty-four she got pregnant,

gave birth to a son, and kept on touring.

Watkins was an instrumentalist, not a singer, which made her even more of an oddity. The images of black men playing guitar and black women cradling a microphone long ago became our ubiquitous hieroglyphs of the blues, and even now the image of a black woman playing guitar still registers as something crackling and new. It's not that Watkins had no one to look to as she was coming up—in the thirties and forties there had been Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Memphis Minnie; in the fifties and sixties, Peggy Jones was performing as Lady Bo in Bo Diddley's band and Odetta was modestly popular on the folk scene. But the path cut before her by these women was faint, and mostly uphill.

Not that Watkins needed a path. The greats rarely do. In the first verse of "John Henry," the steel-driving man is just a baby with a hammer in his hand, singing, "Hammer's gonna be the death of me." As John Henry was always John Henry, Beverly Watkins was always Beverly Watkins. Sometimes fate just makes itself known.

Piano Red changed the name of his band a few times—Dr. Feelgood and the Interns, Piano Red and the Houserockers—before the act dissolved in 1969 (he died of cancer in 1985). By 1970, Watkins had joined up with Leroy Redding, cousin of Otis, and was playing in his band, also called the Houserockers. She played for a few other groups, with musicians she loved and admired, but the work wasn't what it used to be. Soul and r&b begat disco, and many of the first white rock bands to feed on the output of black American blues artists had given way to their own imitators. There was even a white British rock band called Dr. Feelgood, named after the Johnny Kidd & the Pirates' cover. (They're still touring; their website calls "Dr. Feelgood" a "blues standard" and makes no mention of Piano Red.)

Watkins had spent half her life in bands that helped build a world that now had no place for her. She returned to Atlanta and started looking for work offstage. She worked at a car wash, cleaned houses, cleaned offices. But she never stopped playing music.

Piano Red had spent ten years as the house musician at Muhlenbrink's Saloon in Underground Atlanta, a downtown retail district that closed in 1980. When it opened again in 1989, Watkins installed herself as the unofficial house musician of the food court, playing for tips. Billing herself as Mama Watkins, she played blues standards and oldies, sometimes with a drummer and her son on bass, other times with just her guitar and a drum machine. She started singing, too. She'd learned a certain kind of showmanship from her years with Piano Red—the matching outfits and the dance moves he demanded of his bands, his cheerful rapport with the audience—and now she was developing her own style. She'd goose-step like James Brown, sling her guitar around her neck and play a crackling solo behind her head, then hold a note and drop down into a half-split on the concrete. She didn't make much, sometimes just forty dollars a night, but she couldn't afford to be discouraged. A friend told her she needed a catchier name if she ever wanted to make a record. It seemed like a distant prospect, but she became Beverly "Guitar" Watkins anyway. Just in case.

In 1990, Watkins started showing up at Fat Matt's Rib Shack, a barbecue joint with a Wednesday night jam session that had become a haven for Atlanta's older blues musicians. The usual crowd included her former bandmate Eddie Tigner, singer Cora Mae Bryant, and one-armed harmonica player Neal Pattman, each trying to figure out how to stay alive and keep

making music in a world unconcerned with whether or not they accomplished either. Also among the regulars was a twenty-five-year-old white kid from Savannah named Danny Dudeck, a singer and slide guitarist who'd just begun to perform blues under the name Mudcat.

Dudeck was taken with Watkins from note one. On Wednesday nights he'd watch through Fat Matt's big front window for her to arrive, then sidle up to the stage, hoping for a chance to play with her. "It just seemed obvious," he says. "You go to the deepest well to find the strongest stuff."

Over the next few years, as he built his own career, Dudeck helped book Watkins at Northside Tavern on Atlanta's industrial Westside, took her to Paris for her first international solo gig, and brought her along to play blues festivals all over the South. He did the same for Tigner and Bryant and Pattman and others, too, and his work caught the attention of a man named Tim Duffy. In 1994, Duffy founded the Music Maker Relief Foundation, in North Carolina, to help unsupported artists—usually black, elderly, and financially vulnerable—land record contracts, studio time, and live bookings. He asked Dudeck for names and Dudeck told him about Watkins. The next time Duffy came through Atlanta, he stopped downtown to hear her play.

"It was just her and an electric guitar with no rhythm track—nothing, just her," Duffy says. "And then she started hitting a note and going with it and grabbing it and feeling it to her chest and dropping to her knees and playing it behind the head. A lot of musicians that solo, I would call it a 'look at me, look at me, look at me' lick—but Watkins was playing the blues from the center of her heart and it was just there for everyone to enjoy. I was transfixed. Ever since that, just thinking about it, I can hear the guitar solo in my head."

He put fifty dollars in her tip bucket. Watkins remembers it: "He said, 'Beverly, I want to help you.' He said, 'I'm gonna see if I can get you a recording contract.' I said, 'Okay, alright.'"

A few months later, Watkins was recording with Mike Vernon, the British musician and record executive who'd produced records by early David Bowie, Fleetwood Mac, and Eric Clapton. (He'd also produced the 1979 album by the other Dr. Feelgood.) In 1999, Music Maker released Watkins's first record, *Back in Business*. She was sixty years old.

With Music Maker behind her, doors began to open where only walls had been before.

For two years, Watkins traveled around the U.S. with blues multi-instrumentalist Taj Mahal on the Winston Blues Revival, a massive tour sponsored by the cigarette company. She was one of a few supporting acts until, one night, Mahal switched their billing, telling the crowd, "Don't leave—you're in for something!" Dudeck, who played in Watkins's band on the tour, remembers watching the crowd watch her—the dropped jaws, the tears on the faces, the crowd of hundreds having the same reaction he'd had twenty years ago at Fat Matt's, the same reaction Tim Duffy had watching her in an empty food court at Underground Atlanta. "It's in her hands," Dudeck says. "When you hear that one note, people turn their heads, your jaw drops. You can write poetry about it, but you can't really say why it was so important. She does that."

Music Maker helped Watkins release her second album, *The Feelings of Beverly "Guitar" Watkins*, in 2005. Around the same time, she got sick after a show in Washington, D.C., and made it to the hospital just before one of her heart valves clenched shut. While she was in the hospital, recovering from the heart attack, doctors found a mass on the upper lobe of her left lung. To get the cancer out they had to slice down her left side, leaving a scar like a shark bite. For months she couldn't raise her arm high enough to hold her guitar, let alone hoist it over her head. It was a year before she could work again, two before she was able to do her signature trick.

Now her skills are sharper than ever. She still takes lessons, still learns new licks and chords, and she still holds her bands to the same high standards she's always had: "Back in 'em days when I came up, I had to practice," she says. "If we were late for practice twice, I mean, the next time you didn't play. That's the way it was when I was in Piano Red's band. My band now, they have to be on time. And we practice. And we sound good."

This is what she means when she says she lives "that rock & roll lifestyle." She can't rehearse with a band at her apartment at the seniors-only complex. She wants to be somewhere she can spread out, maybe even somewhere with a yard (she wants to grow some tomatoes and peanuts and collards). But before she moves, she wants to make another gospel album (her first was 2009's *The Spiritual Expressions of Beverly "Guitar" Watkins*) and then another blues record. All this on top of the gigs at Blind Willie's and Fat Matt's and Northside and all the soccer games and birthday parties and airport terminals in between.



Last December, an aneurysm left Watkins carrying a stent in her brain and wearing thick, prisms glasses to correct her vision. After years of straining to sing into poorly engineered sound systems, her vocal chords are in rough shape, too. But she's waited, and worked, a lifetime for this. Music is the only sort of future she ever imagined for herself, even when it was all but unimaginable. Now she lives it every day.

"I did want to go to the Air Force," she says. "They came to my house when I was a senior and I took the test, but I flunked the vocabulary test. I didn't know I could have volunteered and went on in the Army and played in the band. But I don't reckon that is what the Lord wanted me to do. So here I am, from there to here I am, and I'm still rolling."

In late August, Mudcat booked a gig at Northside Tavern, with the Atlanta Horns, and invited Watkins to play as his special guest. Northside is a lone grimy holdout on Atlanta's gentrified Westside. As the old industrial buildings get turned into condos and upscale retail shops and restaurants with staff mixologists, the squat little concrete-block building remains as it's always been, smoky and neon

with revelers overflowing into the parking lots on Saturday nights.

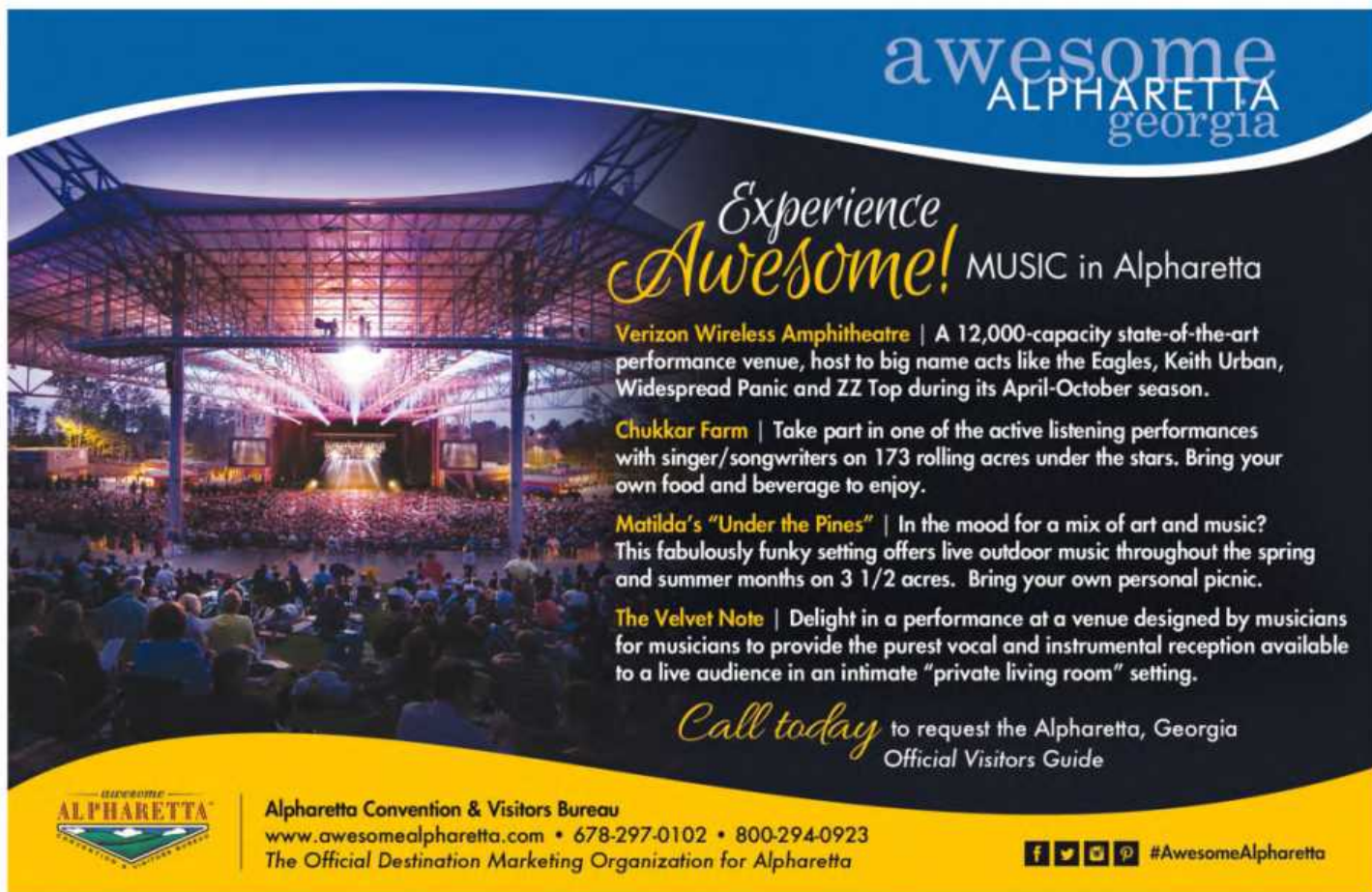
Dudeck and the band started the show with a second-line performance of "When the Saints Go Marching In," blaring brass and washboard and banjo, weaving through the packed room. Watkins brought up the rear, wearing a navy pantsuit and blowing kisses to the crowd. During Mudcat's set, she sat in the back, next to the merchandise table, sipping from a giant coffee mug. To anyone who didn't know better, she must have looked out of place—not that anyone's attention was anywhere but the stage, or the dance floor down in front, where the college kids and the recently ex-college kids and the middle-aged bachelorettes danced and grinned in the sweaty cigarette haze.

After a while, Dudeck stepped back from the mic and trombonist Lil' Joe Burton came forward. He spoke through the crackling din of the crowd: "Ladies and gentlemen . . . Atlanta blues legend . . . ten-year cancer survivor . . . we call her Mama Watkins . . . you call her . . . Beverly 'Guitar' Watkins!"

Watkins floated to the stage, hopped up, grabbed her black-and-white Fender Stratocaster, and welcomed the crowd with a big hello

just like Piano Red taught her. The band fell in beat right behind her, pummeling through "Back in Business" and covers of "My Girl" and "Shake, Rattle and Roll" and Watkins's own version of "Wrong Yo-Yo." An older woman in a sparkly poncho twirled and twisted and swung her hips like she wasn't also holding a fold-up walking cane. A cluster of white dudes in polo shirts took turns doing a dance that involved doffing a straw sombrero. An extremely tall black man stood in the middle of the crowd, recording video of the band with his iPhone, his face slack with awe.

That night at Northside, Watkins was indulgent, profligate. Every time she hoisted the guitar above her head, the wild crowd went wilder. And every time, she grinned under the weight of it, never missing a measure, never slowing down. A body in motion stays in motion, and she's been on the move for years. What she's in search of is not a place she could rent, not a place to stick a couch. All she really needs is space enough for a small woman and a big guitar and the crowd that always follows. It's here she's most at home—onstage, in the thick of it, hammer in her hand. At home, and very much alive. 🐦



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## Got to Ease Up On

BY  
NATHAN SALSBURG

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Bessie Jones got the Holy Ghost in the vicinity of Fitzgerald, Georgia, on September 28, 1932. It didn't happen in a church but in a vision: a tall man approached her with three tickets representing three separate denominations. She chose the Pentecostal Holiness, thereafter taking up membership in the Church of God in Christ. The ecstatic mysticism of COGIC suited

Bessie, who from early girlhood was acutely attuned to portents, signs, and superstitions, cultivating an abiding sense of the spiritually sublime in her work, her relationships, and, especially, her music. She nurtured a prodigious repertoire of songs—hundreds of them, for work, play, worship, instruction—as both a rite and as a vocation. For Bessie, music was a means of honoring her enslaved ancestors, as she called them, and uplifting her hard-driven contemporaries. “Those folks were going through some hardships,” she told the scholar John Stewart in 1978, “and all those good songs, and the meanings of those songs, the Lord gave it to them. It was handed down to them without any schooling. And that’s why I’ve been so delighted to keep it going the old way—the way they had it.”

Jones joined the Spiritual Singers of Coastal Georgia after moving to St. Simons Island in the early thirties. The group had been organized around 1915 by Lydia Parrish (wife of painter Maxfield Parrish) and their charter was a conservative one—preserving through performance

the antebellum spirituals and shouts, the deep African roots of which had remained largely untouched due to the relative isolation of the sea island. Thus the addition of Bessie to their ranks was remarkable. She contributed material inherited from her step-grandfather, Jet Sampson, a prolific singer and multi-instrumentalist born into slavery; ring plays picked up as a girl in South Georgia, around Dawson; work songs learned from convict road gangs, Bahamian fishermen, and Gulf Coast roustabouts; and hymns and songs for worship gathered from a good half-dozen black churches.

By the time folklorist Alan Lomax visited St. Simons with a stereo tape-machine in 1959, Bessie Jones and many of her songs had become fundamental to the ensemble (soon to be rechristened, by Bessie, the Georgia Sea Island Singers). Lomax was entranced. He invited her to New York City for the recording of her “oral biography,” which, when it was completed, covered some thirty hours of tape, including reminiscences, ghost stories, tall tales, jokes, religious testimony, herbal remedies, and many, many songs. Over the course of these sessions, the principals discovered that they were compiling the raw material for a large-scale pedagogical project to which, over the next twenty years, Bessie Jones would devote herself with religious fervor, teaching the old-time songs, plays, and lore to children and adults alike, across the country, in kindergarten classrooms and folk festivals, nightclubs, the Poor People’s March on Washington, Jimmy Carter’s inauguration. Her vision was one of radical egalitarianism, inspired by the enduring collective, expressive folk traditions—occupational, recreational, spiritual—of the black rural South and her ardent faith in a kind of ecstatic liberation theology, which found activist application in the civil rights movement. It was the right time for Bessie to do her work.

The entirety of Bessie Jones’s oral biography is available in free streaming audio through the online archive of Lomax’s Association for Cultural Equity. What follows is one small excerpt, particularly illustrative of Bessie’s mystical worldview and the often-visionary oral poetry in which she expressed it.

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*God made the whole world’s flowers—every tree, every bush—and had to make different flowers to make a bouquet. That’s for us to pick in together; we’s for Him to pick in together. Had to make different color for a bouquet for Him. We’s His flowers. He pick us as He want to.*

A lot of folks in the grave today on account of someone called them “nigger.” ’Cause they got mad about it. Didn’t understand. I remember a white lady, my white lady told me, says, “People get mad about that, Bessie, but they ought to be glad that they are one.” I still is as mad at her right then, and I said, “Now, what are you talking about?” I would go on to read it and I find it on there, where the Lord said that would be: that slang name on earth for what we’re the Ethiopians. And we’re one of the greatest people on the face of the earth. If you would just understand it, see. And we’s a nation. And everything. But I just didn’t know it. And I was talking to my daughter-in-law about it, and she’s pricked against it, you know, and I kept on talking and after she got saved, and go further ’way with the Bible, and began to read, and I ease up on and ease up on—you got to ease up on, you know; you can’t feed a baby off of bones, you know; you got to give him milk, you know—and so I just ease up on, ease up on till I got her to see it. Now she’s as happy with it as she can be. She understand it. It’s just a slang word, Jesus said, that earthy name they call you. And then it goes on that way, over there. It’s in Acts—Apostles, I think it’s around the fifth chapter, but anyway, you see straight-out nigger, the first nigger convert. That’s Enoch. And Queen of Sheba was so black, it’s pitiful. She’s as black as my son. Real dark. Like pretty smooth black skin, had long black hair—that’s Queen of Sheba. The greatest queen. And the prettiest woman of the time. And Jesse was a black man, you see. That was Mary’s father. And Mary is Jesus’s mother. Where he say that I am of the Ethiopian tribe. Root and offspring of David. You know David black.

The colored peoples and the nationality of peoples—I’m talking about the nation of people—all over the country, to my eye and my belief, everywhere in the world, I believe we should realize that peoples are just people. And you’re human and you got to die. We all realize and know that God don’t think no more of you than be do of me. That’s what we oughta see. If God loved you—I was talking to a white lady then—if He loved you more than He did me, He wouldn’t let you have to even birth a baby: He’d let your childrens come on up to you before you. You got to get ’em like I get ’em. You got to go through what I go through it. You got to shed blood. You got to die for that child. That’s right. You got to stink like everybody else. That’s true. Everything is right. But if God thought any more any different in it, well, He would make it different. 🍌



## You Don’t Know What You Mean To Me

BY

JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

“S eriously?” said the teenage girl working behind the desk at the office of the Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Totowa, New Jersey. “You’re like the fourth person in the last couple days to ask about him.” It was a humid Thursday afternoon in early July, and I was looking for Dave Prater’s grave. A middle-aged woman working nearby chimed in: “Who was he, anyway?”

As one half of Sam & Dave, Prater’s voice can be heard on some of the most enduring r&b recordings of the last half-century. In the mid-sixties, Prater and his partner, Sam Moore, crafted a live act so unparalleled in its sweaty tent-revival ecstasy that Otis Redding, sick of being upstaged by his opener, once claimed: “I never want to have to follow those motherfuckers again.” Yet since his death in 1988, the man who was best known to the world simply as Dave has receded from the popular history of sixties r&b, erased from our pantheon of soul legends.

After I told the women that Dave had been a famous musician, they remained perplexed as to the recent surge of interest in his grave. “Was it a recent anniversary, or anything like that?” Not as far as I could tell.

“Can you think of any reason why everyone would be visiting now?”

I could not.

F ive months earlier, a small town in south-central Georgia was hosting its own Dave Prater remembrance. Ocilla, Dave’s hometown, is best known for its Sweet Potato Festival, held every autumn since 1961. Residents from the surrounding area participate in cooking contests, compete in the pageant to determine the annual Miss Georgia Sweet Potato, and buy t-shirts that say *Rise & Shine, It’s Tater Time*. Ocilla, which

has a population just north of 3,000, is also home to the region’s largest private employer, the Irwin County Detention Center, where hundreds of undocumented immigrants are indefinitely detained in what the Georgia A.C.L.U. has described as “substandard conditions.”

In February, fifty-some-odd members of the extended Prater family traveled to Ocilla from all over the country to attend Dave Prater Day. On a Friday afternoon, several hundred people gathered downtown. It was chilly, even for February, and food trucks sold hot cocoa and coffee for a dollar. The celebration began with a talent show, where a few locals sang George Strait and Hootie & the Blowfish. Prater’s granddaughter Shalonda won the competition with her rendition of “When Something Is Wrong with My Baby.”

Throughout the day, Sam & Dave played over the PA, but something was missing. Dave’s son Chris had remixed songs like “Hold on, I’m Comin’,” editing out Sam Moore’s high-tenor parts and turning the duo’s greatest hits into triumphant Prater solo records. Later on, traffic stopped during a moment of silence, and a congressman from the Georgia House of Representatives read a resolution officially recognizing Prater as a “distinguished Georgian.” At one point, four rectangular green signs were unveiled that would adorn each of the major roadways into town. They read:

*Home of  
“Dave Prater”  
Sam & Dave – “Soul Man”  
1997 Georgia Music  
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Ocilla’s Chamber of Commerce had decided to honor Prater as part of its celebration of Black History Month. It was the first time the town had ever recognized its most famous native.

“It should have happened a long time ago,” said Mayor Horace Hudgins. Hudgins moved to Ocilla from nearby Homerville in 1987, a year before Dave Prater lost control of his Chevy and crashed into a tree on Interstate 75, just twenty-five miles west of his hometown. Prater had been driving home, as he did at the end of every tour, to visit his mom. He was fifty.

“S am was the heavens, his voice was almost not human,” Bruce Springsteen has said. “But Dave rooted their music in the dirt and in the earth.” From the beginning, Sam’s otherworldly high tenor overshadowed Dave’s low harmony, and for a variety of reasons—some





personal, some practical, some musical—the history of Sam & Dave has been rewritten in the nearly thirty years since Prater’s death so as to diminish Dave’s contributions. In *Sam and Dave: An Oral History*, the only book published on the duo, Dave isn’t mentioned until page 42.

Almost everyone I talked to who had worked with Sam & Dave throughout their career said a version of the same thing: Dave was the secondary member of the group. When I called John Abbey, a British music industry veteran who produced Sam & Dave in the seventies, he apologized for having almost nothing to say about Prater. “To be very honest with you, I didn’t really get to know Dave anywhere near as I did Sam,” he said. “Dave was, frankly, the junior member of the team.”

Steve Alaimo, a sixties pop singer who produced Sam & Dave’s earliest singles in Miami, went as far as to estimate that Sam & Dave was “ninety percent Sam and ten percent Dave.”

“How do you say who’s responsible for what?” Alaimo mused, resorting to a sports analogy: “The quarterback does everything, but it’s the lineman who picks up the fumble.

Without the lineman, the quarterback couldn’t have had the ball in the first place.” In Sam & Dave, Dave was the lineman.

Dave Prater was born to a pair of sharecroppers in 1937, the seventh of ten children. When Dave was seven, his father died in a fire, leaving his mother, Mary Pressley, to raise the children. As a boy, Dave took to singing, both at the Mt. Olive A.M.E. Church that his family attended each Sunday, and at work, picking tobacco with his siblings in the fields after school. “He never took lessons,” said Dave’s older sister Bertha McMath, shortly after Dave passed away. “It was just a talent given to him by the Good Master.”

One of Dave’s first public performances was at his high school graduation, where he sang a rendition of the Rodgers and Hammerstein show tune “You’ll Never Walk Alone.” During his thirty years as a professional singer, Dave Prater took the song’s title quite literally. He preferred, always, to sing with others. After graduation, he fled to Miami to sing with the Sensational Hummingbirds, his older brother J.T.’s gospel group. Then he had a chance meeting at a nightclub talent show with Sam Moore,

the angel-voiced tenor with whom Dave would perform on and off for the better part of twenty years. Finally, when Prater’s relationship with Moore became strained beyond repair, he sang with Sam Daniels, a high school English teacher from Miami whom Prater enlisted to tour with him in the eighties, much to Moore’s chagrin, as “The New Sam & Dave Revue.”

Despite all of the pain and disappointment it caused him throughout his life, Prater remained eternally committed to singing as one half of a pair, wed to the notion that one can achieve something making music with a partner that cannot be achieved alone. “When you’re by yourself,” Prater said in the early seventies, after his brief attempt at going solo, “sometimes you look up in the sky for that other voice, and it ain’t there.”

Music’s inexplicable alchemy is a frightening thing, and we tend to make sense of it by rewarding individual stardom whenever possible. We lionize the auteurs, those who appear to have absolute authority over their own music: Jimi, Joni, Woody, Nina. But what

does it mean to be famous not for the sound of your own voice, but for the sound of your voice blended with another’s?

“A lot of these duos have problems with each other over the years,” said John Regna, a Florida-based artist manager who served as Dave Prater’s agent in the eighties. “They’re so friendly onstage, and then the next time they talk to each other is on the next stage. They have different dressing rooms; they get to the gig in different vehicles. It’s very interesting, from a sociological point of view.”

The Louvin Brothers, Simon and Garfunkel, the Righteous Brothers, Sam & Dave. It’s no surprise that in a culture so intent on celebrating the stardom of selfhood, the two halves of a singing duo often grow apart.

“The fact is that together, Sam and Dave were *magical*,” David Porter said, a word he kept returning to. As the man who cowrote, alongside Isaac Hayes, nearly every one of Sam & Dave’s biggest hits at Stax Records, Porter had a ringside ticket to the duo’s peak years in the mid- to late-sixties. “I was happy to see that

there's an interest to look into Dave and give him some notice, because he deserves that," he told me.

Compared to Sam's tenor, Dave's gritty baritone possessed a pedestrian frailty. Because his voice seemed so mortal, so *attainable*, Prater had a way of wringing every ounce of emotion out of the simplest of lines, turning an aphorism like "When something is wrong with my baby, something is wrong with me" into a world-ending cry of compassion. His voice was a triumph of finding beauty through, and in spite of, human limitation. While Sam fluttered through falsetto, Dave scratched and fought against his own range, arriving at a deep, unassuming sensitivity. Sam made singing seem easy; Dave sweat his way through each line. Like Dave himself, his voice was humble.

Prater thrived in the shadows of Sam & Dave, reveling in his role of seasoned harmonizer, jubilant supporter, occasional front man. Moore usually handled the interviews. "Some artists are great at telling stories. They understand the nature of the interview, and they understand that if they give good interviews, they're going to get good press," Rob Bowman, author of *Soulsville, U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records*, explained. "Dave Prater was not one of those guys."

"People need to know that there really was a Dave," said Deanie Parker, who worked as Stax's in-house publicist during the sixties. "It is no surprise that Sam always surfaced in the spotlight and Dave seemed to have been hidden in the shadows. That was the difference in their personalities. Sam was the showman, he needed the spotlight. It fueled him. On the other hand, Dave was very quiet. You might read that as passive, but I think Dave just chose to be more reserved."

"He was very comfortable being the second banana," Regna said. If Sam Moore never quite accepted that his career was bound to the voice of his singing partner, Prater prospered in the unlikely arrangement. Prater's voice burst into life when it blended with Moore's, when the two delved into what David Porter has called "abstract harmony parts," the often unconventional, occasionally dissonant, frequently transcendent music that resulted when the two men shared a microphone.

The hit-making solo singer has it easy. His or her voice becomes immortalized: broadcast through car radios, mimicked in showers, worshipped in teenage bedrooms, canonized in "Best of" lists. "Every wedding you go to plays 'Soul Man,'" said Rosemary Prater, Dave's widow.

"Every anniversary party, every sweet sixteen." Sing with a partner for a living, and if, forty years later, your songs are still being heard in grocery stores and basketball arenas, who gets to be remembered? At best, contributions and credits disperse. More likely, they're disputed.

The same two words that decorated Dave Prater's car and license plate also receive choice placement on the front of his gravestone: *Soul Man*, the title of his biggest hit. But the more curious inscription is on top of the grave-

stone: *You were always on my mind.*

"He was really adamant about that song," explained Rosemary at a nearby diner shortly after my trip to the cemetery. Rosemary was talking about Dave's two all-time favorite songs, "The Wonder of You," by Elvis Presley, a ballad he had always hoped to record, and Willie Nelson's version of "Always on My Mind," which meant so much to Dave that Rosemary could think of no finer inscription when her husband died one month after Rosemary turned forty.

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in her sixties. When she doesn't agree with another person's behavior, she will say things like "that's not my cup of tea" or "they're just going to have to reap what they sow." During our nearly three-hour conversation, she shared a number of anecdotes about Sam & Dave, like the time Ray Charles called Dave Prater at home in the seventies asking if he could produce a Sam & Dave record (the project never happened). Or the time Sam Moore played drums and sang for an entire show one New Year's Eve after the drummer didn't show up.

Rosemary first met Dave in 1973, at a Sam & Dave gig on the Jersey shore. Dave had taken a cab to the show from his hotel in Newark and paid the driver to stay until the end of the concert. But the driver took off early, and Dave needed a ride back to the Holiday Inn. Newark was on Rosemary's way home. The next day, Prater called her to see if she wanted to come to his show that evening. Before long, Dave had relocated to Paterson, where Rosemary lived. They moved in together, married in 1982, and he lived there for the rest of his life.

Prater's kids called him Daddy Dave. As road gigs started to thin out in the eighties, Dave spent more time at home, where he liked to

cook fried fish, butter beans, and cabbage for Rosemary and two of his sons from his first marriage, who had moved up to Paterson from Miami. "Dave was a family person," Rosemary said. "He was very dedicated to his mother. If you didn't like his mother, you didn't like him."

"What you saw was what you got with him," said Willa Daniels, speaking on behalf of her husband, Dave's late-career partner, Sam Daniels, who now suffers from Alzheimer's. "Dave was non-pretentious. He was old school. He had this nickname for Sam—he called him Pete. I was just talking to Sam the other day—we were like 'Why did he call you Pete?' Sam said, 'I don't know, but I think he called a lot of people that.'"

Around the comfort of close friends and family, Dave was more outgoing. "My dad was hilarious," his son Anthony told me. "And he could dance."

"I do remember one thing," John Regna said, when I asked if he has any specific personal memories of Dave. "When we would all sit around and tell a story and laugh, his laugh was so hearty that you got a second bite at the laugh. You'd laugh at whatever the story was, and then you'd laugh because of how much he was laughing."

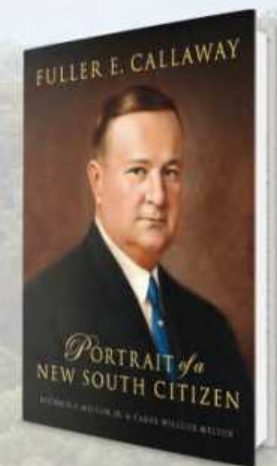
"Everybody who met Dave liked him," said Rosemary. "He was a joyful person. Did he have a bad side? I'm sure he did. Did he show it sometimes or a lot of times? I'm sure he did. I experienced both sides of it, but I take the good and forget the bad, because the bad sides were either tormented or imposed."

That Sam and Dave managed to perform together for two decades is some small miracle. It was a relationship perhaps fraught from the start: Prater, with his nine siblings, a quiet church boy from the country, and Moore, a smooth-talking, mischievous only child from Miami (in his sixties, Sam Moore discovered he was actually born in Macon County, Georgia, less than one hundred miles from Ocilla). "David and I were *never* really close," Moore says in *Sam and Dave: An Oral History*. Moore claims that a cultural divide created distance between him and Prater. "I'm hanging with people like Jackie Wilson, B.B. King, Chuck Jackson," Moore brags in the book. "Dave would try, but to tell you the truth, when Dave would show up, they would be very cordial to Dave. They weren't rude, but as soon as Dave would leave, they would laugh and they'd call him country."

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Moore gave me a written statement when I asked to interview him for this story. “I’ve been accused of hating Dave,” he wrote. “I never have hated him, even when things were a big and ugly mess. For better or worse, we were a team when it counted and our history is what it is.”

“When Dave killed himself,” he continued, “which is how I look at what happened, I never cried, I’ve never mourned and I’m not sure I even know why.”

At the height of their success in the late sixties, Sam & Dave reveled in their newfound rock & roll excesses: women, drugs, customized planes and tour buses. Their success was due in large part to the group’s unrivaled stage show, where Moore and Prater—masters of dynamics, of the quick stops and slow builds and pregnant pauses and dramatic climaxes from the bursting horn section of the Sam & Dave Orchestra—dazzled and delighted, reigning as the finest working old-school showmen in pop music. It was Sam & Dave’s live act that later served as the primary inspiration for the Blues Brothers.

As the duo became increasingly popular, Moore exploited Prater’s quiet disposition. “I took advantage there because I felt that was a weakness in Dave. I thrived on that weakness,” he writes in *An Oral History*. “Years later, Dave would say aloud that I felt like I was better than him. Naturally, I denied it, but when you look back, it was true.”

According to Moore, the duo’s relationship became irreparably damaged after Prater shot his girlfriend, Judith Gilbert.

One night in December 1969, Prater and Gilbert went to see a concert by Little Anthony and the Imperials in Miami. When they returned home, Prater, overcome with jealousy over what he perceived as some sort of unfaithfulness earlier that evening, retrieved his gun from the bedroom and shot Gilbert in the head.

Gilbert, who survived the shooting, ended up marrying Prater shortly after the incident, and remained married to him for several more years. “It was a very tumultuous, miserable, surreal time for us,” said Kevin Gilbert, Judith’s son. In what has become arguably the most famous quote ever uttered by either Sam or Dave, Moore claims, in *An Oral History*, that after the shooting he told Prater: “I’ll sing with you, man, okay? I’ll sing with you. But I shall not ever, ever again speak to you.”

The pair continued to work together on and off throughout the seventies. As bookings thinned out and the demand for soul and r&b waned with the rise of disco, both men de-

veloped a dependence on cocaine and heroin. “Dave took more dope than any other human I ever personally witnessed,” the late Memphis producer Jim Dickinson writes in his unpublished memoir. The cover of Sam & Dave’s 1975 album *Back at Cha* captures them at the height of their disorder: A tired-looking, full-bearded Sam (“I’ve started wearing a beard now, ’cause I’m ashamed,” Moore has said of the period) is leaning on Dave, whose once-boyish, sweet smile has turned sinister, almost maniacal. By that point, because of contractual legalities, Moore and Prater were no longer working with Hayes and Porter at Stax. In the studio they were directionless, recording standards like “Under the Boardwalk” in a desperate search for a comeback.

In 1977, Sam & Dave flew to England, where they recorded one of their last singles. It was a murky, soul-ballad rendition of Lennon and McCartney’s “We Can Work It Out.” A few years later, they broke up for good.

“There are many songs where I’m supposed to be a shadow, a silvery edge around Paul Simon’s lead front part,” Art Garfunkel once said. “I don’t care if it’s seven-eighths Paul and one-eighth Arthur. Look how the silvery edge makes the record work.”

Dave tried to play quarterback just once, returning to Miami in 1971 after one of his temporary breakups with Moore to record two decent, if unremarkable, songs under his own name. “They just put ’em out and that was that. No promotion,” he said shortly after. “Keep My Fingers Crossed,” the stronger of the two, is a driving r&b number that tries too hard to emulate Porter and Hayes’s Stax magic. The next year, Prater was back singing with Moore. Moore also had a tough time jump-starting his solo career, recording a high-profile solo debut for Atlantic Records that was thwarted when the album’s producer, King Curtis, was murdered in 1971.

Throughout the seventies, Moore and Prater continued to rely on each other. David Porter, in fact, vehemently disagrees with Steve Alaimo’s ninety-to-ten assessment of Sam & Dave. “He didn’t know what he had to work with,” Porter said, getting audibly agitated. “That’s a *stupid* comment. If he had known what he had, he would not make a ludicrous statement like that.”

During recording sessions, Porter would stand on the other side of the microphone, coaching Sam and Dave through their vocals. In the mid-sixties, the recording techniques at Stax

were still rudimentary: mess up a take and you had to start all over again. If you listen closely enough to the first few seconds of Sam & Dave’s “I Thank You,” you’ll hear a faint voice shouting “Yeah, baby!” in the background. That’s David Porter, so excited about the magic taking place that he can’t keep his mouth shut.

“Dave knew how to make what he did complement the effectiveness of what Sam would do,” Porter concluded. “There was a uniqueness in Dave’s flavor that made Sam come off better. And there was a specialness in Sam that made Dave come off stronger.”

Porter told me that if he could have done one thing differently in his career, he would have produced a solo album with Prater—let Dave have the spotlight to himself. “Dave Prater has never gotten the proper acknowledgment he deserves. It was so obvious to me how great of a talent he was, and that could have been validated with the quality of that solo record. That’s a missed opportunity that I wish I had not missed.”

Six days before he died, Dave Prater took the stage for the last time. It was Easter Sunday in Atlanta, and Dave was performing as part of a Stax reunion concert alongside some of the label’s biggest names from the sixties: Rufus and Carla Thomas, William Bell, Eddie Floyd, Johnnie Taylor, Isaac Hayes.

After the show, Prater was sitting around backstage with some of the other artists. The musicians all thought Dave, who performed with Sam Daniels, had sounded great, as good as ever, and they congratulated him for hanging in through the years. One of those musicians was Newt Collier, a trumpet player from the original Sam & Dave Orchestra, who noticed Prater quietly beginning to cry. “Everybody was telling him how good he sounded, and he just lost it, man,” Collier remembered. “He couldn’t take it.”

Perhaps Prater was overcome by how well his set had been received, that he had been recognized, finally, by his contemporaries for having contributed an awful lot to Sam & Dave’s music after all. Maybe he was thinking about his old partner then—noticeably absent from the bill that night—whom he hadn’t seen in almost a decade. Or maybe he just agreed with the critic in the audience who wrote days later that Prater’s voice “appeared to be shot” and his stage presence was “framed with apathy.”

Before anyone else could notice him getting emotional, Prater stood up, without saying a word, and walked away. 🐦

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Old Crow Medicine Show at The Classic Center. Photo by Wingate Downs.

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# Little Graves In Georgia

BY

CHRISTOPHER C. KING

On Tuesday, August 17, 1915, the black soil of Frey's Grove in Marietta, Georgia, became blacker after greedily lapping up the blood that slowly trickled down the leg of the recently lynched Leo Frank. A Jewish businessman, educated in Brooklyn, Frank had been found guilty two years before of murdering Little Mary Phagan, a thirteen-year-old girl who worked at his National Pencil Company factory in Atlanta. After what could be regarded as the first trial of the twentieth century that was wholly propelled by the conjoined twin juggernauts of political populism and media sensationalism, Frank had been sentenced to death by hanging, but this punishment had been reduced, upon an appeal, to life behind bars. Shortly after this commutation by Governor John M. Slaton, Frank was rushed secretly to the Milledgeville prison, flanked by a sheriff and two deputies. Even before the decision was made to spare Frank, a violent impulse of indignation and retribution had risen from the white, mainly Protestant population in and around Atlanta. Governor Slaton tasked a special police detail with both protecting Frank and detecting plots to exterminate him before he could be transferred. But several weeks after his transfer to the countryside jail and almost two weeks before the rope was slipped over Frank's head, his neck was slit from left to right by a vengeful fellow prisoner, almost severing the trachea. The deeply sutured wound had almost healed when Frank was seized from the prison by an exceptionally well-organized posse of Ku Klux Klansmen—self-named “The Knights of Mary Phagan.”

If a coroner was present among the “brave and loyal men who took into their own hands the execution of a law that had been stripped from them,” as the *Atlanta Constitution* proudly reported the next day, the autopsy would have likely determined the cause of death as one of strangulation due to a hangman's noose, not



by the profuse blood loss from the reopened knife wound to the neck nor from the repeated kicks to his head with cleated boots. Among the “brave and loyal men” were doctors, former governors and mayors, sheriffs, electricians, preachers, telephone operators: a white-bread “A-Team” of Christian professionals with a tacit mandate to assume the reigns of earthly justice. As Frank's body swung wildly from a branch in Frey's Grove—the childhood playground of Little Mary Phagan—the tightly sewn wound in his neck opened into a jagged gape, a yawning crimson bloom that was photographed and reproduced widely. Images of his lynching were sold in sets of picture postcards to the thousands who thronged to the execution scene.

Death from strangulation, death from blood loss, death from cerebral trauma—all of these would have been superficial readings of Frank's life force being taken away. In truth, he was killed neither by a man nor by the force of men.

He died in the raging flames of hatred and the resulting smoke which obscured the impartial vision of justice. A murder, a botched and terribly obfuscated trial, and a tinder box of xenophobia, anti-Semitism, racism, and “white rights” in post-Reconstruction Atlanta had resulted in yet another murder, the creation of the Anti-Defamation League, and the first strong resurgence of a then-dormant Ku Klux Klan since the group had disbanded in 1869. In this time, frame-ups, coercion, forced confessions, bribery, and political corruption came into sharp focus for the “grift-ridden” people of Atlanta. And it was all set to music.

Before Georgia-born “Fiddlin’ John” Carson became the first “hillbilly” musician ever to etch his playing onto the 78 rpm disc in the South, which he did in Atlanta in June of 1923 (the Texas fiddlers A. C. “Eck” Robertson & Henry C. Gilliland recorded exactly a year

earlier, but in New York City), he was known as a high-profile entertainment fixture in the city and the surrounding environs. In medieval England he would have been regarded as the court jester or the village idiot, depending upon the status of the audience and the mood of the ruler. Carson worked in the cotton and textile mills of Atlanta until a union strike rendered this stout linthead unemployable, and he turned to music as a full-time profession. At the turn of the century he became a bard skilled at extemporizing songs and rasping out melodic lines on his fiddle in an archaic fashion that mimicked the motions of chickens scratching for feed. What he lacked in technical skill he compensated for in roughly hewn yet evocative balladry.

Carson was in the forefront of composers and publishers of contemporary murder ballads—true crime tales rendered awkwardly, sometimes artlessly, but with sweet sentimentality that were then grafted onto a three-chord form. They were not song-catchers. They were death-chasers. Any event that claimed a life (or many lives) and was receptive to a moral lesson (no matter how forced) was fair game and fresh meat. And nothing was fairer or fresher than Little Mary Phagan.

In the records we have describing the twenty-five men who abducted and lynched Frank there is no mention of Fiddlin' John. However, he must have been in the pocket of one of these respected crackers, as he turned up almost immediately after the press advanced upon Frey's Grove to witness their "reclaimed justice." He wrote multiple songs about the case, in fact "turned up with his fiddle at every Frank development within a radius of thirty miles . . . since the day Mary Phagan's body was discovered," as the *Atlanta Constitution* reported in the August 18th, 1915, edition. That same article gives a rare narrative of how music intersects with death:

"Fiddlin' John" Carson swayed the crowds when they were deprived of the picture of the slain man swinging in the heart of the woodland. "Fiddlin' John" is a lanky mountaineer, who lacks a number of teeth, which doesn't seem to impair his vocal aspirations. In his repertoire of folk songs, he has one that is adapted to a quaint, rural hymn, and has for its words a narrative of the murder of Mary Phagan "by Leo Frank, the president of the pencil factory." "Fiddlin' John" would fiddle and sing his song in a typical nasal twang, and he could be heard to the center of the square, around which were grouped hundreds of automobiles, buggies and mountain transports of the "schooner"

variety, which were wagons covered with canvas over arched framework. The crowd would cheer and applaud him lustily, and, inspired by this show of appreciation, he would repeat his song, over and over again. Presently, when his hearers began to tire of the same tune, he deserted it, and replaced it with such well-known selections as "Little Old Log Cabin By The Lane," "Annie Laurie," "That Good Old-Time Religion" and "Mr. Shirley, The Furniture Man." "Fiddlin' John," the troubadour of the mountains, basked in "reflected glory," and it was not until the courthouse crowds began to tire of his songs and fiddle that he departed, reluctantly.

Despite onerous searches for printed lyrics of the songs that Fiddlin' John sang and no doubt published, the only remains lie with the 78 rpm recordings made by Carson, his daughter Rosa Lee, Vernon Dalhart, and one of John Carson's musical compatriots, Earl Johnson. Two songs were composed by John Carson: "Little Mary Phagan" was published in 1925 and "Grave of Little Mary Phagan" was registered in 1917. Based on the reportage of the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1915, Carson must have been singing the crowds the version of "Little Mary Phagan" that Rosa Lee recorded in 1925. Within the tight confines of three minutes, she compresses the twenty-seven months from Mary's murder to Frank's condemnation:

*Little Mary Phagan, she went to town one day.*

*She went to the pencil factory to get her little pay.*

*She left her home at eleven. She kissed her mother goodbye.*

*Not one time did the poor child think she was going there to die.*

*Leo Frank met her with a brutally heart we know.*

*He smiled and said "Little Mary, now you'll go home no more."*

*He sneaked along behind her till she reached the metal room.*

*He laughed and said "Little Mary, you've met your fatal doom."*

As with any "folk art" rendering, the criticisms are almost always from the outside, rarely from within. A highfalutin Northerner would point out that the rhymes are tortured, that the environs of a pencil factory are difficult to

render in a lofty manner, and that the metrical parsing of the verses is all wrong. But from the inside, from the context where the song grew from two pools of blood—Little Mary's and also Frank's—the story holds together as does the moral. The ballad conveys the whole narrative but lacks the details. That is where the Devil is.

Nowadays most historians agree that Frank was innocent, that his trial was a pitiful sham, and that the guilty verdict was an expediency designed to preserve the integrity of the political powers in Atlanta. Someone had to be found guilty, and without any irony, the citizens of Georgia demanded an Old Testament exchange of blood for blood. The broad details of the crime allowed for such machinations.

Here are the fixed points in the narrative. Thirteen-year-old Mary Phagan left her home on Saturday morning, April 26, 1913, at 11:50 A.M. to collect her meager paycheck from the pencil factory. It was Confederate Memorial Day—a high holiday in the South. Around fifteen hours later, at 3:20 A.M. on Sunday, April 27, her body was discovered in the factory's dirt-floor basement. A rope was drawn tightly around her neck and she had a deep gash on the back of the head. Within twenty-four hours, four suspects had been picked up: Newt Lee, the black night watchman who discovered the body; Arthur Mullinax, a streetcar conductor who knew Little Mary; and John Gantt and Gordon Bailey, former and current employees of the National Pencil Company.

At the height of the initial roundup, Leo Frank employed the Pinkerton Agency—a legion of flat-footed and heavy-handed private detectives who counted Dashiell Hammett as one of their own—to assist the city policemen with the murder investigation. This would ultimately prove to be an unwise move for Frank since the district attorney and all the cronies in the mayor's office would interpret such a hiring as a strategy to protect himself. As the private detectives sought to collect evidence and gather interviews that led suspicion away from Frank, city officials began to worry that they might have an unsolved crime on their hands—an unwanted burden when elections were looming.

Thirty-six hours after the discovery of the body, Leo Frank was arrested and charged on suspicion of murder based almost solely on the fact that he was one of the last people to see Little Mary Phagan alive. There was and is no other evidence that suggests Frank had anything to do with her murder. Like a portentous dream from Aeschylus, one could perceive a rope slowly taking





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on corporeal form and dangling in a far-off tree.

Two days later, on Thursday, May the 1st, this shadowy noose tightened around Frank's neck when police also arrested James Conley, a black janitor at the pencil factory. As Frank's lawyers had been illegally barred from the third-degree interrogations of Conley and were never allowed access to the results of these "interviews," it is impossible to verify the variety of changing stories that James Conley presented to the police and the district attorney. We do know this: Conley, who would also be tried, would move back and forth between implicating himself and implicating Frank, giving five different versions of the event in affidavits. His Janus-faced story hinged upon the existence of two bizarre notes found with Mary Phagan's body.

Handwritten with stubs of National Pencil Company graphite, the short statements are almost illegible and unintelligible. The first reads, "That negro hired down here did this. He pushed me down that hole. A long, tall, negro, black, that did the work. Long, lean tall negro. I write to people with me." The second note reads, "He said he wood love me and lay me down to play. The night witch did it but that long tall black negro boy did his self." Naturally these were not written by Phagan—a point belabored by various handwriting experts brought into the trial. Conley would assert at various times that Frank transcribed these notes to him to put blame on Newt Lee, the night watchman, or any long, tall, black, lean negro other than himself.

One meaning of the term "wolf ticket" is a false lead or a clue designed to throw off the scent from the bloodhounds, to obfuscate a true pursuit. The notes left with Little Mary's body are classic wolf tickets, but were eagerly exploited by the prosecution against the defenseless defense team. (Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb famously employed a similar wolf ticket with their murder in 1924 of Little Robert "Bobby" Franks. They typed a ransom note *after* they had murdered Little Bobby in order to hide their true motive—that as Nietzschean *Übermenschen*, they could kill with impunity from an intellectual impulse.)

Very few minority communities in Atlanta escaped the vindictive and suspicious eye of the police, the mayor's office, the loony detective agencies, and the sensational newspapers during the indictment, trial, and appeals of Frank. A Jew of German descent and a black man were being tried for a brutal murder. In the atmosphere of Atlanta, anyone deemed "foreign" or nonwhite could be viewed as guilty by association. Jewish businesses were shunned, if not publicly de-

nounced, German restaurants were boycotted, and black neighborhoods were systematically cordoned off and raided. Even the Greeks of Atlanta were targeted. Demetris Vafiada, the city's Greek leader, complained about the implication that the rope found tied around Mary Phagan's neck had been fashioned by a Greek because of its unique knot. The small Greek citizenry of Atlanta protested on Whitehall Street the day after this nugget appeared in the *Atlanta Journal*. This did little to undo the Gordian knot. It was a bad time to not be a Scot-Irish ofay.

Political corruption, graft, and bribery were so rife in Atlanta during the trial as to almost be comical. Accusations and cross-accusations of bribing witnesses, detectives, and officers were cast about daily in all the local papers. Neighbors of the Phagans even attempted to retain their own lawyer to pursue more thoroughly a guilty conviction of Frank since the public fretted openly that the fractures in the district attorney's office would cancel out the efforts of the prosecution. However, the lawyer in question, Thomas B. Felder, was so inept that he ended up being accused of bribing the bereaved parents of Little Mary, an event that created a journalistic tsunami in the May 25th, 1913, papers.

History places perhaps an unfathomable chasm between the generations that lived within a system of open racism and "fear of the other" and the generations that follow, those who learn about the experiences but never witnessed their darkest depths. I recall in the now-fading Technicolor hues of the 1970s my brother being horsewhipped on the street with a chestnut brown leather belt, buckle gleaming gold in the sun, by our grandfather—a Southerner who would have followed the Mary Phagan murder in the daily paper as a youth himself—for putting his hand in a bag of potato chips that he shared with a young black man. Fear of the black, fear of the Northerner, fear of the "other" was not merely programmed—it was instinctual, primal, and native.

Even Little Mary's corporeal remains suffered. Her body was exhumed twice for further forensic testing. But perhaps the greatest victim of those two years was *earthly justice*—common decency. Balance was not sought and equilibrium was not maintained, neither by most of the city officials nor by many of the citizens. The political and judicial powers had *their* version of the murder—they worried that this rich Northern Jew, whom they saw as a depraved sexual



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predator, could murder an innocent Southern white Christian girl and get away with it due to his connections with organizations established north of the Mason-Dixon line.

The sad, predictable trope—the dichotomy between the powers of Northern industrialism pitted against the powers of Southern agrarianism—claimed Frank as its victim and served as an underpinning for all future bloodletting. Once these Atlantans determined that they could make James Conley tell their version, Leo Frank was doomed and no other suspect or story would suffice. Though he would be found guilty, sentenced to death, appeal his sentence, and be granted commutation, in the end he had to be consumed by the earth—the people of Atlanta had cried out for blood and they saw Frank as the only suitable sacrifice.

The May 15th, 1913, edition of the *Atlanta Constitution* contained a discovery, a nascent theory that never took root. Perhaps the prosecution cast it aside since it muddled the waters of the case against Frank. Maybe the mayor or the Pinkerton Agency or any of the dozens of people who had their hands in the pot decided that it was irrelevant. The headline read: VICTIM OF MURDER PREPARED TO DIE. The article focused on a slip of paper found inside of Little Mary Phagan's metal pocketbook—a small satchel that she carried with her at all times except for that fateful morning. On this tiny note was written “April 20, 1913—My name is Mary Phagan. I live at 146 Lindsey Street, near Bellwood and Ashby Streets.” Solicitor Hugh M. Dorsey believed that folded piece of paper implied that “she had already been threatened with death or had a premonition of an early demise.” He stated for the record:

Looks as though she expected an accident of some kind. By George! She must have. This slip was written only six days before she was killed on Confederate Memorial Day.

Perhaps briefly, solicitor Dorsey entertained the notion of an alternative explanation, a different killer with a different motive. Possibly he even realized that Frank had no motive, no reason to kill Little Mary Phagan or anyone else. A reason: it helps to have one.

Although forensic science was still in its infancy, the two coroners, Dr. Hurt and Dr. Harris, did maintain that Little Mary Phagan had not been sexually violated prior to her death. Therefore, rape was not a motive. Further, the \$1.20 pay that Mary collected was no reason for her

murder. Everything rested upon James Conley's coached testimony. It was enough for the jury to convict Frank of the crime that “startled the entire Southland.”

Part of seeing anything is apperceiving that which is not present—everything has a context and flow just as our actions have a meaning, either explicit or tacit. That Frank had no reason to murder Little Mary Phagan mattered little to the court. He was painted as a one-dimensional caricature, a beast of wantonness with “abnormal” desires. Conley testified that Frank made him write those notes and move the body to the basement. For his admission as an accessory to the crime Conley served only a year in jail. Almost seven decades after the trial, Alonzo Mann, at the time of the murder just a fourteen-year-old employee of the pencil factory, gave a sworn statement that he saw Conley drag Little Mary Phagan to the basement. This testimony by Mann, along with the Anti-Defamation League's constant pressure to characterize Frank's trial as unfair, led to a posthumous pardon of Frank in 1986.

Frank never confessed, not in court nor in the minutes before he was strung up by the Ku Klux Klan. As I read descriptions of the scene immediately after he was lynched, my mind went back (or perhaps it went forward) to the aftermath of the Charlie Lawson murders. On Christmas Day 1929, outside of Danbury, North Carolina, Lawson killed his wife and six of his seven children (aged seventeen years to four months) before shooting himself. No note was left behind and no one could advance a theory as to why he did it. Just as the crowd rushed under the oak tree in Frey's Grove to pull at Leo Frank's tattered clothes, to tear away buttons, shoes, tufts of hair, most of his nose, so too did the “morbidly curious” snatch raisins from a cake baked by Charlie Lawson's wife, untouched since that Christmas morning. Everyone wanted to have a *memento mori*, either out of fear or out of vengeance. And, as with Little Mary Phagan, a murder ballad grew from the blood of the slain Lawson family and was performed extensively in North Carolina.

This murder, like so many violent crimes, was labeled “senseless” (later it was revealed that Lawson's oldest daughter had told her best friend that she was pregnant with her father's child and that both her mother and father knew the truth—a reason in this case). But after we wrestle with the “senselessness” in which these things occur, something curious emerges from within us, something which could very well be weaved into our way of negotiating with the world. Our mind moves from that which

is senseless to that which is sensical. What is bewildering eventually becomes comprehensible, primarily because we uncover the motive or the motives for a killing.

Perhaps these old murder ballads serve a deeper function, to help us traverse the liminal stage between the inexplicable and the understandable—much in the way that the older, more elaborate and lengthy periods of mourning help ease us from the acknowledgement of death to the finality of burial. There is a shared misery, a communal notion of lamentation contained within Carson's ballad:

*The astonished asked the question, the angels  
they did say.*

*Why be killed little Mary Phagan upon  
one holiday.*

*Come all of you good people, wherever you  
may be.*

*Supposing little Mary belonged to you or me?*

Who killed Little Mary Phagan? Can any sense be made one hundred years after the murders of both Phagan and Frank? Conley cleaned up the mess so that he wouldn't get in trouble. But why frame Frank then? Perhaps someone close to Mary, her stepfather or a relative, had carnal knowledge of the young girl and threatened her life. It is the case that J. W. Coleman, her stepfather, first suggested that Newt Lee, the black night watchman, was the murderer. We do not know, for instance, if Coleman was interrogated, if he had anything approaching an alibi, or if he knew Conley prior to the murder. It could have been the perfect frame-up. Perfect sense.

Not far from the prison in Milledgeville where Frank was seized was someone who had a seamless answer for the senselessness of it all. In a world where a burning bush symbolized both a covenant and a power outside of the corporeal sphere, where a man would sacrifice his son to prove his loyalty to his God, and where “Jesus thrown everything off balance,” Flannery O'Connor would likely point to our fall from grace as the underpinning for all this evil.

In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, O'Connor paints the senselessness vividly as a whole family is offed by The Misfit and his gang during a vacation drive. The Misfit is part me, part you, part everyone. We wrestle with what is understandable, what is inexplicable, what is right and what is unjust and we are no wiser than when we started out. The Misfit says, “Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain't punished at all?” 🍷



# Don't You Remember a Comedy Song?

BY  
JEWELLY HIGHT

Ray Stevens is a slippery one. He'll don an endless succession of zany personas, then suddenly play it straight and savvy when you least expect it. In the music video for "The Streak" he's all over the place, making his entrance as a voluble TV news reporter, chasing down the scoop on a flashing incident at the local Bi-Rite. He shoves a microphone (unplugged) in the face of a colorful character (Ray Stevens, again)—a slack-jawed, hayseed bystander sporting a bright yellow Caterpillar cap—whose wife, Ethel, has just been scandalized by the buck-naked man racing down the jams and jellies aisle. A third Stevens, playing a grocer in an apron and bow tie, picks up the story from there, contributing a deliberately hammy vocal performance.

After the song concludes with a scene in a college basketball gym, Stevens slips out of character. Then he breaks the fourth wall. Into the shot huffs a dour, priggish, business-suited woman, a representative of the Department of Standards and Practices, who scolds, "Once again, Mr. Stevens, you have managed to—pardon the expression—barely stay within the bounds of what is permissible." An impish Stevens waits a beat, then tugs the hayseed's cap back on at a crooked angle and summons a doltish drawl: "Yeauuuh, Uh did." He mugs for the camera, cutting his eyes to the side with a lopsided grin, his expression signaling that he knows exactly what he's doing: championing his resolutely silly, lowbrow humor in the face of more buttoned-up sensibilities—and doing it at his own expense, for his audience's benefit. He's making sure they feel like they're in on the joke.

In the early nineties, I watched "The Streak" and the rest of Stevens's *Comedy Video Classics* compilation pretty much every time I visited my paternal grandparents in their decaying North



Carolina town. My cousins, my sister, and I would inevitably go stir-crazy looking for things to do, so somebody would grab the tape from a shelf in the closet, where it sat next to *Sister Act* and *Prancer*, and shove it into the VCR. We kids would plop ourselves down on the plaid sofa, flanked by Papa in his recliner, spitting Red Man into an empty soup can, and watch Stevens clowning on the screen. By the time I became a preteen, I wanted to believe I was too cool for his cornball humor, but the antics entertained me in spite of myself. Stevens was our down-home, living-room jester.

Years later, after I became a music journalist, I'd see Stevens mentioned as a footnote to career histories of Nashville icons like Dolly

Parton, Kris Kristofferson, Fred Foster, Chet Atkins, and Roger Miller. In 2010, the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum spotlighted his work as a piano-playing side man. Long before that, he'd been inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame. These were no trivial accomplishments. I began to reevaluate. Maybe there was more to Ray Stevens than I'd realized.

The headquarters for Ray Stevens Music stands at the corner of Grand Avenue and Music Square West on Nashville's rapidly gentrifying Music Row. From the outside, the building could pass for a tidy doctor's office ringed in manicured shrubbery, but inside, it



houses all of Stevens's business and creative operations, including two separate recording studios.

In lieu of a receptionist—Stevens doesn't currently employ one—the door buzzer summoned his tall, jolly right-hand man, Buddy Kalb. The boss, Kalb informed me, was at an actual doctor's office. He offered to give me a tour of the premises. Just inside the door and throughout the building were rugs bearing Stevens's Clyde Records logo, a camel silhouette with palm trees in the background. (It looks virtually identical to the Camel cigarettes logo, except the animals face in different directions.) We wound our way down hallways, past open office doors, through a handsomely appointed lounge, and into the "big studio."

"This is the step where Tammy Wynette broke her arm," Kalb cautioned, alluding to an incident that predated Stevens's ownership. The space was prepped for Stevens to work. Song charts were piled next to the mixing console, and an array of keyboard instruments—pianos of grand and electric varieties, a Fender Rhodes organ—stood at the ready.

The path to the smaller studio cut through rooms lined with cardboard boxes of CDs, DVDs, and Stevens's hardcover memoir, part of the mail-order operation he's had going for close to a quarter-century. This studio was crammed with racks of costumes from videos—like the plush, pillowy muscle suit he wore in "Gitarzan"—and mounds of props. There was a treasure chest from "The Pirate Song." A knight's shield from the album cover of *Surely You Joust*. A red, adult-size tricycle left over from his years in Branson, Missouri, Las Vegas of the Midwest.

Stevens is impressively industrious at age seventy-six. He's developing a television show and gearing up to build an entertainment complex just outside Nashville that will house both a Vegas-style supper club (the Stevens-designed CabaRay) and his new offices and studios. Blueprints were spread across his desk. When he strode in, he looked ready for the dinner crowd: dark jeans, loafers, a sport coat, and a red pocket square, his face framed by the same well-groomed beard he's been wearing for decades. He settled into a chair with an air of purpose, ready to get down to the business of responding to questions, not to mention impatient to break ground on his new venue. "We're kinda at the mercy of the permits people down at metro codes," he said. "But we're getting bids on building it. So as soon as my architect gets back from vaca-

tion..." Stevens trailed off and eyeballed the blueprints. "He's got another week."

Though his dad spent his working life in textile mills and impressed upon his son the value of an honest day's wage, Ray Ragsdale, as Stevens was known in childhood, was more or less raised to perform—not through some passing-down of picking skills, but through formal instruction. While the Ragsdale family made a home in tiny Clarkdale, Georgia (where Stevens was born in 1939), then moved to slightly more bustling Albany (in 1949), and finally Atlanta (in 1956), his mom kept him in piano lessons starting at age six and insisted that he plant himself at the keyboard at least an hour each day. He picked up clarinet, trumpet, tuba, and drums in the school band program, and started a teen pop combo that played school dances.

He got his first chance to try to prove his singing and songwriting potential to somebody in the business when his Sunday school teacher, also a radio DJ, introduced him to Bill Lowery, an Atlanta-based music publisher, label head, and all-around entrepreneur. Lowery asked to hear a song, and Stevens wouldn't settle for a make-do demo session in his bedroom or garage. Already he thought like a record man; he was after a particular, popular, reverb-bathed sound. Since those were more permissive times, he had no trouble convincing his school principal to fork over the keys to Druid Hills High for the weekend so that he could record the first song he'd ever written, the doo-wop ditty "Silver Bracelet."

Lowery made "Silver Bracelet" into a minor regional hit and encouraged his young protégé, by then billed as Ray Stevens, to continue his formal musical education, including three years of music theory at Georgia State. Stevens gained valuable experience writing, recording, and producing for Lowery's National Recording Company, alongside Kalb and guitarist-songwriter Jerry Reed, later of *Smokey & the Bandit* fame. At the time, Stevens liked to experiment in the studio and was taken with the popular youth music of the day. It was hardly a given that half a century later he would come to be seen as a novelty act, indeed, as one of modern country music's foremost jokesters.

His piano playing took cues from the dash-ing syncopation of Ray Charles, and his early songwriting hewed to a popular, clowning hybrid of r&b and rock & roll, following on the heels of such late-fifties smashes as Sheb Wooley's "The Purple People Eater" and the Coasters' "Yakety Yak," "Charlie Brown," and

"Along Came Jones" (some of which Stevens would go on to record). It wasn't lost on Stevens that these colorful, cartoonish song subjects and playful performances, often incorporating theatrical sound effects, were gargantuan crowd-pleasers. Charming a crowd was exactly what he wanted to do, so he learned the tricks of the entertainer's trade: make it catchy and culturally resonant. He wrote a rock & roll song riffing on the sort of dubious health remedies that'd been hawked to minstrel show, radio, and television audiences dating back to Crazy Water Crystals. With its drolly exaggerated yet familiar-sounding claims, Stevens's "Jeremiah Peabody's Polyunsaturated Quick Dissolving Fast Acting Pleasant Tasting Green and Purple Pills" landed on the pop chart, exactly as he had hoped.

Besides keeping Stevens busy in Atlanta, Lowery occasionally sent him to record in Nashville. After Stevens signed with Mercury Records there, he was offered a label gig plus a guarantee of session work. He and his young wife, Penny Jackson, moved to Nashville in 1962. Their one-bedroom apartment was so cramped that their infant daughter, Timi Lynn, had to sleep in a dresser drawer, and Stevens felt a pressing need to deliver a hit that would enable them to upgrade their living situation. Late one night he came up with the idea of spinning *One Thousand and One Nights*, the collection of Middle Eastern folk tales better known to American readers as *Arabian Nights*, into the utterly goofy, jive-talking "Ahab the Arab," during which he bellowed in imitation Arabic and brayed like a daft donkey.

"I think what attracted me to the idea," he wrote in his memoir, *Ray Stevens' Nashville*, "was that I could make weird noises. I didn't know what a camel sounded like so I made up a sound that turned out to be right."

The song became a Top 5 pop smash. It is a composition of its time, though Stevens bristles at the notion that many contemporary ears can't help but hear reductive, or even racist, undertones.

"So I wrote this song about a guy that's gonna mess around with one of the sultan's most valuable harem girls, and gets away with it," he told me in his office. "Now a lot of people think it's politically incorrect, but I cannot for the life of me figure out how they came to that conclusion, because there's nothing political about it. It's just a funny song."

Even with a few novelty hits under his belt in the sixties, Stevens's professional future was still wide open. His skill set was as diverse as any

musician's in town. He alternated between comedic material and more serious-minded songs and picked up work playing piano and singing on Nashville recording sessions, doing complex arrangements of strings and horns, and handling A&R for record labels; he'd find material for artists to sing and get them ready to record it, tasks he performed for Dolly Parton when she was new to town.

An early appreciator of Kris Kristofferson's literary knottiness, Stevens beat Johnny Cash to the eloquently wasted "Sunday Mornin' Coming Down." (Stevens recorded it in 1969, a year before Cash took it to No. 1.) So committed was Stevens to his interpretation of the song that he spent countless studio hours tweaking it. While preparing for its release as a single, he turned down a little number Burt Bacharach and Hal David wanted him to record for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*—which is why the world knows "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head" as a B. J. Thomas song.

Stevens framed "Sunday Mornin'" in grand, glistening orchestration and sang it with gentle vibrato, the ruefulness of his delivery edged in articulate warmth. But it was—he was, he's said—a bit too "white bread" for the confessions of a hungover bohemian. He saw his rendition tank, only to watch Cash come along and score a major hit with the song. Stevens's younger daughter, Suzi Ragsdale, who's a singer-songwriter herself, affirms on the phone: "Yeah, he thought Johnny Cash was so successful with 'Sunday Mornin'" because people could see him drinkin' beer for breakfast."

Cash was known to dabble in humor himself (see: "A Boy Named Sue"), to say nothing of his heartfelt gospel material, but he frequently aligned himself with rough-and-tumble characters, boasting of their exploits in his songs, putting on concerts behind prison walls, and, when in the throes of addiction, living as hard as they did. With his sense of musical play and eager, polished showmanship, Stevens never conformed to the model of daringly dark artistry that's been idealized from privileged perches throughout the rock era and beyond.

Sitting across from him, I floated the idea that he's always come off as being more congenially mischievous than cool and dangerous.

"Oh, I'm not cool and dangerous?" he chuckled.

I changed tack. "Do you feel like your career has earned you the reputation you wanted?"

"I hadn't thought about that," he said. "It's not up to me to voice an opinion on that, because I'm too close to the trees to see the forest. I'm



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not in any way aggrieved or disappointed by how I am perceived, because I am what I am and there's nothing I can do about it. I mean, there is *something* that we can all do about it—we can do the best we can. But as far as entertaining and writing and being in the music business, I really have no role as far as my reputation.”

“Put it this way,” I said. “Have you ever felt underappreciated?”

“Do *you* think I’m underappreciated?” he tossed back, unwilling to budge, but not unkind.

I said I wasn’t sure.

“That sounds like sour grapes to me, and I don’t deal in sour grapes.”

Since Stevens more or less fought me to a standstill when I tried talking to him about perceptions of his music, I turned to his long-time acquaintance Don Cusic, a professor of music business at Nashville’s Belmont University.

“In this day and time, an artist is supposed to write in order to be authentic, and the writing is supposed to be self-expression: *This really happened to me, or These are my deepest feelings*,” Cusic told me over the phone. “And Ray’s not like that. Ray’s from that old school of what works. Those guys thought of the audience. Will the audience like it?”

Cusic added that he’s trying to help Stevens get into the Country Music Hall of Fame. “Comedy is more important in the history of country music—in the history of recordings—than it’s given credit for.”

People do tend to overlook the wit and skill involved in country comedy, presuming it requires nothing more than a cheap set of prosthetic Billy Bob teeth. Really, though, there was down-home virtuosity in the performances of Grandpa Jones, Minnie Pearl, and plenty of the other long-running characters on *Hee Haw*: a mastery and magnification of the cadences of vernacular speech; an upending of elitism; a strong grasp of situational comedy, glorious absurdity, and knowing caricature. Often there were first-rate, playfully deployed musical chops.

Long before Weird Al Yankovic became the reigning pop parodist, Stevens was goofing on familiar pop songs. In his hands, the Glenn Miller big band standard “In the Mood” became a cacophony of swinging, clucking hens (credited to the Henhouse Five Plus Two). When he did his first interpretation of a Kristofferson song since “Sunday Mornin’ Coming Down,” he dispensed with emotionalism and gave a silly reading to the sensual plea, “Help Me Make It Through the Night.” Roughly fifty seconds into

the track, the performance pivots from inflated country-politan finesse to hillbilly slapstick.

“That was on that video we sold on TV,” noted Stevens, gesturing toward the cover of *Comedy Video Classics* hanging on his office wall. (It’s emblazoned with a still photo from the end of “The Streak,” with Stevens bugging his eyes and showing his tongue.) “Sold five million.” Stevens’s words bear no trace of regret. If anything, he’s proud. Defiant even. He found his audience, he made them laugh, and he has the numbers and plaques to prove it.

Stevens released *Comedy Video Classics*, his collection of eight music videos, in 1992. Besides the Kristofferson number and “The Streak,” the titles include one of my personal favorites—“Mississippi Squirrel Revival” (the story of a rodent sparking a charismatic awakening in the First Self-Righteous Church)—and the lewd phone call escapade, “It’s Me Again, Margaret.” Perusing online customer reviews confirms that I’m not the only one with memories of multigenerational viewing. As a buyer recalled on Amazon: “2 of my grandchildren grew up watching this and laughing their heads off.”

Stevens, Kalb, and the rest of their team originally manufactured the videocassettes as a merch item to sell at Stevens’s Branson shows, then ventured into hawking them through vociferous television ads. *Now, for the first time, you can see eight of his greatest, funniest hits!* the announcer crowed in the sixty-second cut. *You get it all on one hilarious VHS videotape!* All that was required was a toll-free call and \$19.95, plus \$4.50 for shipping and handling.

The As Seen on TV approach carried with it a certain down-market connotation, the decidedly elitist notion that it was only unsophisticated products that got the fast-talking, low-budget, small-screen pitch. But Stevens didn’t sweat the possibility that the ad campaign might devalue his music in anyone’s eyes. “I don’t think about selling music to people who are that prudish,” he scoffed with a smile. “If you have the music people wanna buy, it doesn’t really matter where they’re exposed to it.”

These days, many of his fans are exposed to his music on YouTube. His intense displeasure with the current administration’s policies has become one of his primary songwriting themes, as evidenced by many of his more recent uploads. Green-screen music videos with defiant titles like “You Didn’t Build That,” “Obama Budget Plan,” and “If You Like Your Plan” seem to outnumber goofball efforts like “Taylor Swift Is Stalkin’ Me.”

Suzi Ragsdale acknowledged, “Some of ’em are a little more political than I would ever perform myself.” (She’s more in step with the folkie storytelling tradition, having sung alongside respected singer-songwriters like Guy Clark, Darrell Scott, and her ex-husband, Verlon Thompson.) “He’s gotten into that right-wing stuff pretty heavy, and he’s got a whole fan base from that. I just stay out of any political discussions, but I really enjoy that he can make his statement and still be fun and funny and kinda lighthearted.”

Stevens’s biggest comedy collection to date took an entirely different form than his video classics. He spent the better part of two years selecting and recording 108 novelty songs, plenty from various eras of his own catalog, as well as a slew of oddball sixties pop hits, pre-electric hillbilly rube numbers, parodies, and more. They’re all collected in his *Encyclopedia of Recorded Comedy Music*, released in 2012. None of it is the least bit bawdy. He said, “I was just going straight down the middle: family audience.”

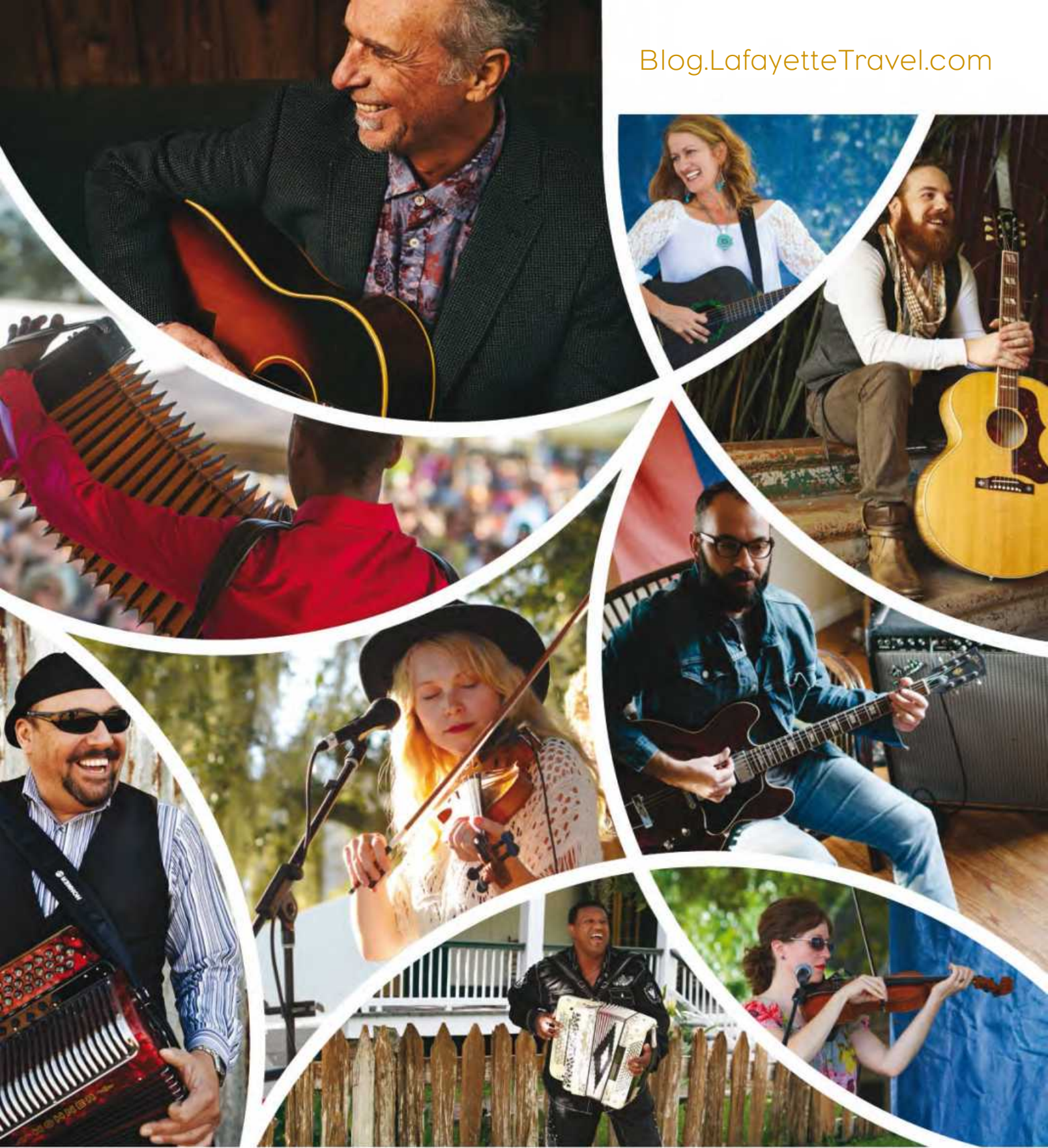
To go with the music, he compiled information on each song’s authors and original performers for an accompanying booklet and commissioned a short essay on the history of comedy music from Cusic, who rightly points out that Stevens’s writing and arranging prowess has led to some musically sophisticated comedy cuts.

In the booklet, Stevens lays out his agenda: “I would love for people . . . to understand that humor is often more memorable and ultimately more important in a listener’s life than some sappy love song.”

In person, he doubled down on his defense of the cultural importance of funny music. “Don’t you remember a comedy song?” he prodded. “I mean, it’ll just leap into your mind quicker, most times, than a love song. Sure, it depends on the song, but just because it’s a comedy song doesn’t mean it’s here today, gone tomorrow.” He had a point; his funny material has stuck with me for more than twenty years.

Regardless of what he said about his reputation being out of his hands, with the box set Stevens made a canny argument for attributing aesthetic and cultural value to his music. The fact that he titled it an “encyclopedia,” and treated it as a hefty research and recording project, suggests that he’d like to enjoy greater respect for the sillier side of his life’s work, and the comedic tradition of which he’s a part. “Every university should have one,” he said of his nine-disc behemoth. It sounded like he was only half-kidding. 🍷









# SUGAR-FOOT STOMP

by Cynthia Shearer

Jazz owes its origins to the bump and grind of turn-of-the-century brothels and the colored waif orphanages of the South's great cities, but where is the wellspring of *swing*? If you say *Chicago*, the answer is *no*. Benny Goodman would be the first to tell you so.

The fountainhead of swing, children, is a little white frame house with a tin roof, on the black side of the tracks in Cuthbert, a red-dirt Georgia cotton-gin town. This is where they used to lock Fletcher Henderson in the parlor with a piano, beginning about 1903 when he was six. If he didn't practice, he got whipped. He was a sweet-faced child, with his mother's light skin and his father's old eyes. Sometimes the house grew quiet and Fletcher curled up on the floor to take a nap. Even at an early age, he showed signs of what the great white jazz mahout John

Hammond would one day call "lassitude."

Fletcher was born with the burden of perfect pitch. Whatever the boy heard, he heard as music. A commotion of younger siblings with the chickens in a swept-earth yard. An arpeggio of rose thorns scraping on the mailbox. A cadence of mule-trot through an open window. Henderson's parents were the salt of the earth and the sugar, too, but they decreed there would be no music under their roof on Andrew Street that did not dignify the lives of black people. No blues, no degrading coon songs, no ham fat.

The Henderson family piano is a venerable old beauty, now enshrined in the Amistad Collection in New Orleans. It is carved mahogany, an upright model with brass pedals, purchased from Phillips and Crew on Peachtree Street in Atlanta for \$275, payable in monthly installments of \$10. Professor F. H. Henderson, Fletcher's father, signed that contract on September 25, 1906, the day after the Atlanta Race Riot, when poor whites attacked, burned, and looted middle-class black neighborhoods and businesses. The

contract allowed Fletcher's schoolmaster father to skip the payments in summers, when he had no salary coming in. Professor Henderson's credo was "I never drink, smoke, or dissipate in any manner," but he wagered all he owned for that piano. He mortgaged his house to pay off the piano note. Music would be the mighty fortress to keep his children safe.

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Nobody had a clue that in the future, Fletcher Henderson's raids against the precepts of ragtime and "sweet" white dance music would someday make everybody tap their toes, from the starched-shirt demagogues down south, who hired him to play their cotton carnivals, to the bootleggers in bulletproof Duesenbergs up north, who hired him to play in their plantation-themed dens of iniquity, to most of our great-gartered grandmothers, packing flasks in Prohibition speakeasies or shimmying in secret along to the radio.



Professor F. H. Henderson had been born a slave. By the time Fletcher came along, his father was a towering figure in Negro education in Georgia, the principal and Latin master of the Howard Normal School, a model Negro training institute. Fletcher's grandfather, James Henderson, also an emancipated slave, had fought unsuccessfully in the South Carolina legislature for written contracts and a living wage for black men. He had witnessed widespread violence by whites and assassinations of blacks who had been elected to public offices in Newberry County in 1868.

The Cuthbert of Fletcher Henderson's youth lynched black men at a rate slightly higher than other Georgia towns, at a time when Georgia was topping the lists they were keeping over at Tuskegee. Professor Henderson was a deacon at the Payne Chapel A.M.E. church, which stood like a sentry tower by the railroad tracks, the line of demarcation between black Cuthbert and the sometimes volatile whites on the other side. His house was across the street from the church. He apparently served as a mediator between the white and black communities.

When Fletcher was born in 1897, people were still talking about a manhunt the year before and the men who were lynched by mistake. When Fletcher was nine, someone tried to burn down his father's school a few days before a "private" hanging of a black man named Will Price, convicted of the rape of a white girl. In 1909, when Fletcher was eleven, a black man named Albert Reese was taken forcibly from the Cuthbert jail by a masked mob of fifteen "unknown parties" and hung from a pine tree west of town, right where the Central Railroad crossed the "public road," within sight of the Payne Chapel A.M.E. church, or a few hundred yards over on what is now U.S. Highway 82.

If you push one pin into a map for every lynching in Fletcher Henderson's corner of Georgia during his childhood and youth, it looks like the furies left behind a dark spray of buckshot. We get some hints about those times for the Henderson family in the professor's obituary in the *Atlanta Daily World* many years later: "His sober judgment and influence saved many a Negro from the lynch noose."

In 1911, the family put thirteen-year-old Fletcher on a train to attend high school in the city. For eight years, Atlanta University would be his safe harbor. The plan was not foolproof: in late September 1916, a few days before Fletcher's freshman year started at the university, two more black men were accused of murder and promptly lynched without trial in Cuthbert, just on the

other side of the tracks from the Hendersons' home and church.

At Atlanta, Fletcher Henderson had freedoms that could get him in serious trouble back in Cuthbert. He had white classmates and white teachers, some female. He ate meals with white people. He skipped the music curriculum but studied Greek and elocution. He swept floors to help pay his expenses. He studied chemistry, lettered in baseball and football, was a Big Man on Campus with the ladies, and belonged to Alpha Phi Alpha, W.E.B. Du Bois's fraternity. He was the university organist.

By 1915, Henderson was taking the train north every summer to play piano at the Broadwater resort in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, owned by one of the white Atlanta University faculty, Miss Annie A. Bowman. She is most likely the attractive dark-haired woman who figures prominently in a remarkable collection of photos in a scrapbook from Fletcher's college days.

In one snapshot, we see Fletcher as a shy-looking young man in tweeds contemplating seashells from atop a craggy constellation of rocks. In another, he stands on the bow of a docked sailboat, his hand on the mast, holding eye contact with the photographer, possibly the white Miss Bowman herself. Possibly she is the woman in another image wearing a modern white lawn dress, with pearls and heels, with what looks like Fletcher's shadow in the left foreground. If this is she, then Annie Bowman is one of the unsung heroines of American music history. She gave Fletcher Henderson a place to mix ragtime and Rachmaninoff during some of America's bloodiest summers, when the bottom-feeder caste of whites down south were getting all liquored up and looting and burning entire black communities, blowing into their whiskey jugs and calling it music.

His senior year in college, Fletcher was introduced to another important influence, Professor Kemper Harreld, a Morehouse College music professor whose specialty was classical composers who cribbed from folk music. Harreld was a striking figure in a woolen coat and bowler hat, the musical director of a traveling racial uplift pageant, *The Open Door*, a gorgeous, allegorical production using pantomimes, lavish costumes, choirs, and a tiny orchestra, with graduating senior Fletcher Henderson on piano. In the 1919 version of *The Open Door*, Fletcher played Edward German's "Torch Dance" paired with the black composer Nathaniel Dett's "Juba Dance." Other pieces in Henderson's *Open Door* repertoire: Rachmaninoff's "Prelude in C# Minor,"

Offenbach's "Barcarolle," Delibes's "Pizzicati," and Grieg's "Canon." Their first performance was in the cavernous Atlanta Auditorium Armory. Then they took the show on the rough roads to Macon and Savannah. In the college yearbook, a classmate wrote that the world would someday know Fletcher Henderson's name.

After graduation in 1920, Henderson took a train to New York with his diploma in hand, ready to serve humanity in a laboratory. White humanity in New York, it turns out, preferred to be served by black sleeping-car porters, butlers, chauffeurs, bellhops, or musicians on riverboats. No problem: American music became Henderson's lab and popular songs his experiments. He subbed for a roommate as a pianist on a riverboat, and met his future wife, Leora Meaux, a pretty trumpet player from Louisville. He worked as a song-plugger for W. C. Handy and Harry Pace, an Atlanta University graduate. Whatever blues he'd missed out on in Cuthbert, he got back in spades in that job.

When Pace decamped to start the first all-black recording company, Pace Phonograph Corporation, Fletcher went with him. Their label was Black Swan, and their concept was historic: let black people record and sell their own music without forcing them into commercial hokum stereotypes. Fletcher was going head to head with seasoned white talent hunters and producers at established companies like Okeh and Paramount. By 1921, he was auditioning singers and choosing what and whom Black Swan would record.

In its short life, Black Swan was a source of great pride to American blacks. White record companies didn't appreciate the competition, and someone put a bomb in the coal order for the Black Swan pressing plant. Records by black opera singers or Marcus Garvey's pianist didn't sell well, but those by lissome young female blues chanteuses did. When Fletcher accompanied Ethel Waters on "Down Home Blues" and "Oh Daddy," Black Swan had a runaway hit, and Waters and Harry Pace made a lot of money. Pace decided to send Waters, Fletcher, and a small orchestra, the Black Swan Troubadours, on an extended tour, beginning late autumn of 1921.

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Push one pin into a map for every stop the Black Swan troupe made in the dying days of vaudeville and you see more than a random chitlin' circuit tour. Early on, Pace sent in a new manager, Lester Walton, whose résumé included management of Harlem's Lafayette

Chicago was a pivotal moment. Walton suddenly announced an extended swing “down south.” Four musicians promptly quit. Ethel Waters made an impassioned dressing-room speech about the moral imperative to carry the music to those who needed it most. Nobody else bailed. Waters schooled Henderson in Harlem stride piano by making him listen to the piano rolls of James P. Johnson.

she sang her hit songs. Fletcher kept the band from playing too hot, and backed the comedy skits on piano. He was six-foot-two, with hair cropped close to his head. He had never had any burning urge to lead a band, it had just *happened*.

They played piney-woods towns in Arkansas where survivors of the 1919 Elaine massacre might have fled. They played Paris, Texas, which was christened by the *Chicago Defender* as the birthplace of burning black people at the stake, most recently the Arthur brothers, one of whom had been a war veteran. But the Black Swan group was treated amicably, and the audience included white people. In Waco, the troupe performed within blocks of the infamous public square where a crowd of 15,000 whites had cheered in 1916 as a mentally deficient Negro boy was tortured and burned alive, his torso dragged through the streets. They played in Austin, where an NAACP field secretary had been beaten to within an inch of his life.

black bandleader to broadcast on radio. He tried to hire a young local, Louis Armstrong, on the spot, but Armstrong would not leave his drummer. (They would meet again soon.)

Waters later claimed that in Macon, Georgia, local whites threw the body of a lynched boy into the theater lobby shortly before her performance was to start, but this is inaccurate. A body was thrown into the lobby of the Douglass Theater some months after *Black Swan* passed through. They moved on through Dixie, and scalloped up the Eastern seaboard home to Harlem, and the *Black Swan* players disbanded by the end of the summer of 1922.

Pace Phonograph was being muscled out of the competition by bigger white-controlled recording companies, and by the mass production of radios. The Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill died at the hands of Southern senators. Pace folded in 1923, but young Fletcher Henderson had acquired a lifelong love of touring. He had learned how to lure the black public forward with a hint of the same old sorrow wrapped in a bandanna, but to leave behind the gold filigree of clarinets and trumpets, like airfoils they could follow to a better altitude.

Henderson was soon being name-checked in



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the *Phonograph and Talking Machine Weekly* as one of the best freelance blues specialists in New York. He had become one of Harlem's most-booked accompanists for the great blues chanteuses, including Ma Rainey, Lucille Hegamin, Trixie Smith, Clara Smith, and even Bessie Smith, who had suffered rejection at Black Swan. He had a secret composing life, using the pseudonym George Brooks for blues songs that he wrote as if knocking out nursery rhymes. We have "George Brooks" to thank for ten of Bessie Smith's big numbers.

In January 1924, Henderson took his first band out of Harlem and into Club Alabam, just off Times Square. Its bootlegger owners had remodeled it to make it resemble a Southern plantation. Prohibition New York teemed with these Dixie-themed speakeasies—Kentucky Club, the Black Bottom, the Plantation Club, the Cotton Club—a subtle racism soon to be etched into the American consciousness in Warner Brothers wiseguy films. These were strictly segregated, yet America was enchanted with ham-fat songs about mammy in her bandanna in Alabamy. Henderson's men had to set up on a bandstand that was a fake plantation house back porch, in front of murals of trees scumbled with Spanish moss. A fake French door with a fanlight said it all: even Northern white people liked to imagine themselves being entertained by plantation darkies freshly convened from the cotton fields, playing for Ole Massa hisself.

Few of Henderson's young sidemen had ever set foot in Dixie. Most were Great Migration babies whose parents had long since fled the South. Coleman Hawkins was from Topeka. Don Redman was a prodigy out of Harper's Ferry who could play any instrument put in his hands. Segregation kept them all out of "legit" symphonies or pit orchestras. When Fletcher Henderson and his colleagues squared off with that first all-white audience at Club Alabam, it must have felt somewhat like *anthropology*, a first encounter with volatile primitives whose reputation for barbarism had preceded them. He answered the moment with equanimity and grace, and wooed the whites forward toward their own evolution with songs like "Teapot Dome Blues," "After the Storm," and "My Papa Doesn't Two-time No Time." As word got around, Henderson became that "hot" Harlem bandleader you could hear without actually having to step foot in Harlem.

When white owners tried to get Henderson to fire Hawkins for refusing to dance with one of the chorus girls, he declined. At first opportunity, he eased the band off the fake plantation porch of Club Alabam, over to the original

Roseland Ballroom on Broadway. Roseland had two bandstands, one black, one white. When the white band left to tour, Henderson's men quietly became the house band by default. This would be home base for Henderson for over a decade. His audiences were white, thousands of them. Radio broadcasts from the ballroom gave him a national reputation. Apparently he worked without a contract at Roseland, cash and carry. He bought a house on Striver's Row. By 1926 most dance orchestras, black and white, were imitating the Henderson sound: "pyramid" chords, sectional counterpoint, advanced harmonies, flatted fifths. Team racial uplift had gained considerable yardage. No ham fat, no hokum, no jellyroll required.

Henderson loved to graft European orchestral notation onto silly little street songs, to take a single note of melody and fan it out into rich, syncopated color. This required cutthroat sight-reading skills, with a penchant for sudden improvisation. One of his sidemen later compared the Henderson requirement to being able to see around corners. The received wisdom was, if you could cut the mustard in that band, jazz was *yours*, baby.

Some of Henderson's best work happened when he would rake the cheap veneer of lyrics right off a trite white Tin Pan Alley song and make it new. He could peel a hurtful racist song down to its studs, then renovate it into a stater mansion in which a black soul could stand at its full height. While white America was still drunk on ragtime and bogus blackface "coon-shouter" songs, Henderson minimized lyrics and substituted jazz breaks. Louis Armstrong learned the hard way that Henderson didn't have much respect for scat singing, and he began to pour his whole story into his horn.

If Henderson's men had something to say, they had to say it with their instruments. This is why those solos often achieved the power of human voice, clarinets bubbling up out of the bass line to exchange witticisms with the trumpets. A tuba would burp along amiably, then suddenly assert its right to pontificate. "Sugarfoot Stomp" (1925) runs like a souped-up Model T with a creaky carburetor, syncopating about a half-hitch too fast. You can hear all the way into the future on that side: a barely containable twenty-three-year-old Louis Armstrong and a twenty-year-old Coleman Hawkins on tenor saxophone, each already in possession of a singular instrumental voice, with Billie Holiday's dad, Clarence, keeping it all glued together with guitar. The effect is rollicking and wonderfully *crunk*.

Henderson's bands could play sweet jazz, but their true love was hot, hard-driving stomps.

"Dionysiac heat" is the way one New York critic described the Henderson sound in the *Saturday Review*. Those old brittle 78s, he said, don't really capture the "golden seething spirit of a Fletcher Henderson occasion."

They could also signify well under the white radar. Armstrong brought "Go 'Long, Mule" to Henderson and Don Redman. In their hands, the song is no longer the muddled country marmalade of King Joe Oliver. The woodwinds trill in such high harmony they sound like gnats buzzing around a mule's head. Those gnats sound suspiciously like the Boswell Sisters, white gals notorious for appropriating black music and parlaying it into fame and fortune.

Listen attentively to Henderson's 1932 version of the cruelly racist "Underneath a Harlem Moon" and you can hear Hawkins, college-educated out of Topeka, wordlessly substitute nonchalant tenor sax for the white Tin Pan Alley fake nostalgia for "Ginia hams" and "candy yams," before trailing off into a derisive, flatulent raspberry. The worst of the original's offensive lyrics are erased, and W. C. Handy's daughter Katherine sings what's left with *bite*.

Some of Henderson's recordings are important milestones in American music: "The Gouge of Armor Avenue," "Wrappin' It Up," "Snag It," "Radio Rhythm," and a host of others. In 1927, the great silent filmmaker Murnau (*Nosferatu*) used Henderson's composition "Tozo!" to symbolize the dangerous allure of the urban future, in a film called *Sunrise*. Today we most likely encounter Henderson's music deployed to evoke the past in films like *The Razor's Edge*, *The English Patient*, *Road to Perdition*, the HBO television series *Boardwalk Empire*.

For most of the Roaring Twenties and into the Great Depression, Henderson's bands were the first turnstile through which many a young black male musician passed, fresh from far-flung American precincts, on the way to his rightful place in jazz iconography: Louis Armstrong, Don Redman, Big Charlie Green, Lester Young, Rex Stewart, Red Allen, Chu Berry, Buster Bailey, Roy Eldridge, Cootie Williams, and a whole pantheon of others. The most obvious case of influence is Benny Goodman, who built his reputation on Henderson's book and his back, only to be anointed "king of swing" in the perpetual paternity suit that is jazz criticism.

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In a glossy promotional photo from 1932, an elegant, lanky Fletcher Henderson stands in the center of a line of black musicians in



matching suits and wing tips on a pier in Atlantic City. His arms are folded comfortably across the front of his double-breasted suit, the wind whipping his pants against his long legs. He looks like the Sepia Jay Gatsby, only *happy*. This iteration of his band was formidable, possibly his greatest ever. The photo scans like a pocket edition of *Who's Who in Jazz*: Russell Procope, Coleman Hawkins, Edgar Sampson, Clarence Holiday, Walter Johnson, John Kirby, Russell Smith, Bobby Stark, Rex Stewart, J. C. Higginbotham, and Sandy Williams.

This is the crew that took a stock flood song of the sort meant to be sung operatically by Paul Robeson, "Take Me Away from the River," and turned it into a wicked "viper jazz" ode to marijuana. Procope's clarinet percolates like a klezmer hookah, and Hawkins blows a world-weary sax. The menace in that song was not the Mississippi, but a dazzling river of urban motion and light. A couple hours after they recorded it, they gave perfect, gentlemanly accompaniment to white child star Baby Rose Marie as she belted out a little charmer, "Take a Picture of the Moon," complete with Sophie Tucker-like barrelhouse growls. You would never know, looking at the photograph of the Henderson group on that pier,

that 1932 was the beginning of the end.

Trumpet player Rex Stewart's memoir, *Boy Meets Horn*, describes the breakup of this phenomenal band in 1933 and Henderson's unwillingness to confront whites even as they abused and cheated the blacks. The men were usually overbooked and underpaid, sometimes not paid at all. Some nights, the rumor of no pay owing to contractual "infractions" would sweep through the band even as they were performing, so the musicians would fade out into the night one by one, leaving Henderson playing alone. Stewart describes vividly the predatory contracts, the "chicanery and maneuvering," and the malevolent presence of New York's notorious "Local 802" union reps backstage, demanding personal kickbacks, threatening to ruin bandleaders who did not comply. "Local 802" was so thoroughly corrupt that testimony from its victims figured prominently in 1934 Congressional hearings on mob infiltration of the American labor force.

The straw that seems to have broken the back of Fletcher Henderson's last good band was John Hammond himself, who thought nothing of signing contracts committing them to work they'd not been consulted about, then professed puzzlement at their perceived lack of enthusi-

asm. It's unfortunate that jazz writers seem to default to Hammond's mythologizing. Hammond said that Henderson was hindered by his lack of business sense, his mistrust of white men, and his "self-defeating acts of independence." Rex Stewart said the men quit when, the day after they returned from a harrowing road tour down south, Hammond had booked them to play without pay at a benefit for the legal defense fund of the Scottsboro Boys.

Louis Armstrong's biographer James Lincoln Collier called Fletcher Henderson a "tragic figure." Collier reminds us to take into account that peculiar American time when black musicians like Armstrong and Henderson fled the South only to land in a new world "peopled on the one hand by gangsters, who would maim and kill if sufficiently frustrated, and on the other by whites speaking another language and dwelling in offices, hotels, and restaurants, where blacks could not penetrate."

If Henderson's career fadeout was tragedy, what did success look like? Louis Armstrong's white agent was on cordial terms with the Chicago mob. He routinely skimmed half of Armstrong's earnings, *before* deducting his agent's percentage, up until the day Armstrong died.



Duke Ellington worked for years to steer jazz out of Cotton Club plantation burlesque and into European concert halls. To accomplish that he let a white man claim half the copyright to every work he composed, and ceded forty-seven percent of the sweat of his brow for well over a decade. Ellington asked to see the books one day, and promptly terminated the relationship. That agent, Irving Mills, was the man Fletcher Henderson had declined to work with, and the inspiration for “George Brooks.” We will never quite know what price Henderson paid for dodging Mills’s desire for consolidated control of his talent.

And what are we to make of Fletcher Henderson’s leading the “Connie’s Inn Orchestra” in 1930 and 1931, under contract to the same white men who drove Louis Armstrong out of America for two years, when they tried to threaten and muscle him into an “exclusive” engagement? In 1933, the *Chicago Defender* used the language of slavery to describe Henderson’s Connie’s Inn-related woes with a misleading front-page headline story, FLETCHER HENDERSON WINS \$1,000,000 SUIT. Henderson was “freed from the bonds,” they said, of a “theatrical agent bearing the name and instincts of Fishman.” Fishman once tried to bring Jelly Roll Morton into compliance by sending him on a “blind date” into an abandoned mining town; now he wanted a percentage, not to exceed a million dollars, of Fletcher Henderson’s future earnings as they would be disbursed to him by the same Connie’s Inn thugs named on Louis Armstrong’s restraining order.

By 1933, Henderson’s bankruptcy was official, his primary creditors being one of his own sidemen, Fishman’s Orchestral Corporation of America, and Lou Irwin, a white man whose main meal ticket was Ethel Merman. Irwin was the kind of gent who would assault musicians of color who demanded their pay, and advance clients like Billie Holiday money for drugs and then kneecap them with million-dollar lawsuits.

It’s not a stretch to see why \$37.50 per arrangement for Benny Goodman, a relative nobody with a new radio show, would look pretty good to Fletcher Henderson by the mid-1930s. The *Chicago Defender* chastised him when he started selling off his entire book of “head arrangements” to Goodman, saying that if he just handed over black jazz to whites, it would put black musicians out of work.

Egged on by John Hammond’s activism and propensity for fantasy-league jazz combinations, Goodman and Henderson pushed the racial envelope at their own risk, but they quietly and methodically integrated big bands in the late 1930s. The new white-dominant “swing” was smooth as a syndicate. Its fans were young stompers at the Savoy blessed with amnesia about Jim Crow. Big bands fronted

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## Elegy for an Accordion

BY  
CHELSEA RATHBURN

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That ribbed black box that could be coaxed to croon  
by surer hands than ours—where did it come from?  
From whose family history? Was it in tune?  
I must have been the one who brought it home  
from some estate sale or bric-a-brac store.  
Wherever I bought it, whatever I paid  
for its pearl and filigree, I’m sure I spent more  
than I should have, swayed by its beauty and swayed  
by my wanting to please. My husband, who could  
play anything, who’d asked for one, shelved it  
in the guest room, where its bellows choked with dust.  
We were young. Our marriage was never good.



by whites followed Goodman's lead in adopting Fletcher Henderson's basic template for swing. It seemed to telegraph something new and necessary to the generation that was girding its loins to ride to the other side of Hitler's and Hirohito's bomber-yards and then home.

We don't know enough about Fletcher Henderson's extended Grand Terrace gig in Chicago in 1938, when the *Defender* identified the white man who ran it, Ed Fox, as his "manager." Fox's claim to fame: he co-owned the Grand Terrace with Al Capone's brother. Henderson picked up the Grand Terrace gig after Earl Hines found the courage to walk out on a contract that had underpaid him for years. Many black jazz musicians did indeed lose jobs, as club after club shuttered their doors. By 1943, one of Fletcher Henderson's last bands was banned by a local union from playing the Rockland Palace in Miami because he had hired three young white musicians eager for the chance to play with him.

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By the time Fletcher Henderson eventually played Carnegie Hall, with the white Goodman and the black Lionel Hampton,

the white lady sang, and nobody got lynched. Hammond, by then Goodman's brother-in-law with conflicts of interest sixteen ways from Sunday, seemed often to sacrifice Henderson's best interests to the larger causes of racial integration and Benny Goodman's success. He positioned a younger black piano man, Teddy Wilson, in Goodman's personnel. The next new replacement white lady sang, and even Southerners ate up all the jazz sweetness with a spoon.

Russell Procope, the great clarinetist who lingered as long as he could with Henderson and then left him for Duke Ellington, once described a pivotal moment in his boyhood, hearing Fletcher Henderson's early recordings pouring out of almost all the open doors and windows of Harlem in the 1920s. The Henderson sound inspired Procope to consecrate his own life to jazz. He later said, "I never got the figures, but Fletcher Henderson musta sold a helluva lot of records. Somebody musta made a hell of a lot of money. You can believe that."

Grainy old film footage shows Benny Goodman dedicating a performance to Henderson after he died of a stroke in 1951, faded from the consciousness of the American public. Goodman's eyes go watery, remembering. He uses the

word "genius" to describe his black colleague, and this gesture deepened respect for Goodman in both races. But how can we not be haunted by his brother Horace's stories of the toll that the Goodman collaboration took on Fletcher? "Benny would think nothing," Horace said, "of calling you up at four in the morning, telling you, 'I've got to have this by ten.'" Horace, a musician in his own right, described finding Fletcher asleep at his piano in the middle of the night sometimes and having to lead him upstairs to get undressed for bed, even helping him finish the work at times.

"This was the source," wrote a *New York Times* jazz critic, a decade after Henderson's death. The occasion was Columbia's 1961 release of *The Fletcher Henderson Story: A Study in Frustration*, a four-album set covering Henderson's work from 1923 to 1938, now considered the necessary compendium. It's all here: "Sugarfoot Stomp," "Dicty Blues," "Variety Stomp," and the sublime and magisterial "Jackass Blues." You can pay your money to the white men to hear this music, or you can forage for free on the Internet. Whether you catch the Henderson sound on the black swing or the white, claim it as your human birthright. It's an updraft that will lift you to a place beyond race. 🐔

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## Family Reunion

BY  
RODNEY CARMICHAEL

About a year and a half ago, Rico Wade invited me to his crib. As one-third of Organized Noize, Atlanta's eminent trio of producers, Wade used to live in a mansion known as the White House because of its likeness to 1600 Pennsylvania. He'd since downgraded to a modest brick ranch located on the working-class end of the Cascade corridor. When I arrived, he was barbecuing chicken on a charcoal grill on the patio out back. Marqueze Etheridge, his friend since middle school and cowriter of TLC's biggest hit, "Waterfalls," was there. So was Joi, longtime first lady of Dungeon Family and originator of the style eventually dubbed neo-soul. So was Ramon Campbell, another friend from way back who'd also been in the short-lived r&b group U-Boyz along with Wade, Etheridge, and Sleepy Brown. It was all family. And Rico was telling stories.

Not in any kind of chronological order, mind you, just stories as fast as they could come. About giving Marqueze his first fade in middle school so the girls in class would stop clowning his Jheri curl. About U-Boyz blowing their group audition for Pebbles but still impressing her enough to score a meeting with her then-husband, the record executive L. A. Reid. About working at the beauty supply store Lamonte's, where he met two young rappers named André and Antwan, whom he would help groom into the best-selling hip-hop group of all time.

A quick talker by nature, he tends to stutter a bit when he gets real excited. And Rico Wade is always excited. Already in the midst of filming a documentary directed by Quincy Jones's son, QDIII, titled *The Art of Organized Noize*, he was also drumming up interest for a coffee table book, an Organized Noize album, and a memoir under the same name. As the root of the Dungeon Family tree, Organized Noize spawned the South's most celebrated hip-hop collective, opening the door for OutKast and Goodie Mob, among many others. Since the announcement of OutKast's twentieth anniversary tour several months earlier, Rico had become obsessed with creating some tangible product to capitalize on the wave of renewed Dungeon Family fandom. More than a nostalgic rewind, Big and Dre's onstage reunion after a twelve-year hiatus represented a return to relevance for the extended family. Beyond the potential to cash in on a lifetime of investment, it presented Rico with the opportunity to set the

record straight on the legendary rise and storied demise of the first family of Southern rap.

He'd spent the last several years healing from the wounds of losing his Organized Noize Records label deal, as well as his mother's home and the White House to foreclosure. Not to mention the in-depth 2010 *Vibe* magazine exposé on Dungeon Family that he felt sensationalized his admission of cocaine use. "Media is a motherfucker," he'd tell me later. "I told them I tried coke—they tried to make me into a fuckin' straight crackhead."

He laughed it off now, choosing to focus on the bigger picture. In fact, when we met again in August, right after the blockbuster debut of *Straight Outta Compton*, he'd added "biopic" to his list of proposed pet projects. But this movie wouldn't be his alone. Within Rico Wade's narrative lies the story of Atlanta. How it evolved from civil rights stalwart to hip-hop capital. How a tribe of outcasts rose from the dungeons of rap to the top of the charts. And how the kid who started from the bottom ended up here. At forty-three, he's still got something to prove. Most people with music industry aspirations find a way to build a business. Rico built a family instead. Then he discovered why family and business rarely mix. But when your past is OutKast and your present is a rapper named Future, it ain't over till the last ATLien sings.

Rico Wade's bedroom is decorated like a genius's—which is a nice way of saying it's a total mess. Clothes scattered everywhere.



Empty Newport boxes discarded on the floor. An Atlanta Falcons flag hangs in one corner, an Obama CHANGE poster on the opposite wall. “I write on everything,” Rico says, explaining the random scraps of paper. “A-sharp, B-flat—on some real mad scientist shit.”

This explains his current approach to production. Though he never let me hear any of the new stuff Organized Noize is cooking up for their forthcoming album, Rico says he wants it to be a blend of everything. “I want the trap mixed in with the EDM with the Organized sound. I just want to evolve it.”

When I tell him I’m scared to imagine what this new Noize might sound like, he laughs. “I think everybody is. That’s why we ain’t putting shit out. Everybody loves us so we gotta give you what you want, but I want that shit to turn up a li’l bit. I want our sound to go through transitions. I’m into a clusterfuck.”

Before crunk, snap, and trap music turned Atlanta out, the red clay funk of Organized Noize defined the city. From the groaning bass line of OutKast’s “Ain’t No Thang” to the nervous plink of those ominous piano licks on Goodie Mob’s “Cell Therapy,” the music echoed the environment. As one of the first hip-hop production units to forego costly sample clearances for live instrumentation, Organized Noize Productions shared more in common with the soul legends whose source material inspired them than they did with their superproducer hip-hop contemporaries. The Atlanta sound they concocted from the dungeon-like basement in Rico’s mother’s house turned space and place into elemental forces. Like Muscle Shoals Sound Studio or Stax in Memphis, ONP remains synonymous with ATL.

The three-man production unit Rico co-founded with Ray Murray and Patrick “Sleepy” Brown, using a name they’d originally intended for a girl group, became the fuel to Dungeon Family, birthing first-generation acts OutKast, Goodie Mob, Big Rube, Witchdoctor, Cool Breeze, and Backbone. Together they gave the South a voice competitive with rap’s bicoastal bedrocks.

Before major labels began manufacturing mock hip-hop crews as tools to market and promote new signees, artists formed ciphers organically. The details of how Big and Dre met Rico, Ray, and Sleepy—in an East Point strip-mall parking lot on the corner of Headland and Delowe—have been rapped, retold, and mythologized a thousand times over. But it all boils down to spirit. That’s the best way to explain what brought them there that day.

It’s the same element that eventually drew each member of the Dungeon Family together. Even now they remain the only legacy hip-hop crew with “family” as the basis of their name. Not a clique. Not a squad. Not a posse. A family.

The business came next. Since Organized Noize already had L. A. Reid’s ear, Dungeon Family acts OutKast and Goodie Mob signed production deals with Organized to record for LaFace Records. But Sleepy Brown, Ray Murray, and Rico Wade were more than producers. They were artist developers, mentors, big brothers, and player-partners to everyone under the Dungeon Family umbrella. What started as a loose collective of hungry emcees became an organized unit under ONP’s leadership. The magic they made as a family grew directly out of a brotherhood built on shared experience and a mission to prove hip-hop’s Down South narrative was as essential to rap as those classic breakbeats Georgia’s own James Brown provided as hip-hop’s sonic DNA.

Rico, the charismatic mouthpiece of ONP, is also something of a mystery—especially when it comes to quantifying his musical contribution. He’s often blamed for taking too much credit, but he’s also the one whom few outside the immediate circle know quite how to credit. Ray is responsible for bringing the noise as an intuitive beat programmer with a mastery deserving of his nickname, Yoda. Sleepy, the son of Atlanta “dazz” band Brick’s front man Jimmy Brown, supplies the funk as a multi-instrumentalist soul slinger with a silky voice. But if his collaborators have more tangible skill sets, Rico is the trio’s X factor: part visionary, part missionary, all purpose. Less button-down businessman than born hustler, with a sharp intellect and a knack for offbeat production, Wade’s instinct for what’s next has always made him a magnet for talent.

To illustrate the kind of singular creative vision Rico Wade possesses, it helps to go back in time. Summer, 1981: a dangerous year to be a black boy in Atlanta. Somebody was snatching them up at night and leaving dead bodies behind as evidence. The whole affair seemed out of character for the city too busy to hate. Things were supposed to be different. The city’s first black mayor, Maynard Jackson, was nearing the end of his second term. His legacy would help bankroll a generation of black millionaires through government set-asides that gave minority contractors a foothold in the city’s future. The only blemish on his time in office was the seemingly unsolvable mystery of more

than two dozen missing and murdered children.

By the time a twenty-three-year-old aspiring music producer and youth talent scout named Wayne Williams was arrested on suspicion of killing two adult men on June 21, 1981, the city was so eager to declare the case closed on the child murders that the discrepancies and doubt surrounding his guilt didn’t matter. The serial killings had plagued the city for nearly three years. In that time, Georgia’s native son, a former peanut farmer named Jimmy, had lost his presidential re-election to a jelly-bean-loving Hollywood veteran. Meanwhile, the fight to make hometown icon Dr. King’s birthday a national holiday had gone pop with the recent release of Stevie Wonder’s hit, “Happy Birthday.” (It would take two more years to convince the new president to sign it into law.)

Closer to home, on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, nine-year-old Rico was about to stumble upon a dream of his own. The way he remembers it now, it looked to a kid like the circus was coming to town. People clapping and waving. A cowboy on horseback. There was a party happening in the parking lot of his Garden Valley Apartments and young Rico was at the center of it. When a well-dressed black man wearing a genuine smile parted the crowd, shaking hands and kissing babies along the way, “it was like Jesus,” Rico says. The man handed the boy a sticker that read YOUNG FOR ATLANTA and something in Rico’s soul lit up. The way he interpreted it at the time, this was a divine sign that Atlanta was destined for the young. “I didn’t find out till years later that the sticker was for Mayor Andrew Young’s campaign,” Rico told me. “The campaign to me was the ‘youth for Atlanta.’ Like, the kids.” By the time he came to realize what those stickers really meant, Rico was busy gearing up for a campaign of his own—one that would put the youth of Atlanta on the map for decades to come.

*Man, the scene was so thick,* he narrates over the beginning of the video to 1993’s “Player’s Ball.” *Low riders. ’77 Seville. El Dawgs. Nuttin’ but dem ’Lacs.*

A shirtless Rico Wade exits the kitchen of his momma’s old house in Lakewood Heights carrying a bowl of no-name-brand cereal. His pants are at half-sag and his hair is plaited back in cornrows. This is Rico in his prime, at twenty-one, with swagger on full blast. Across from him sit Antwan Patton and André Benjamin, looking cool but coy, like a couple of baby-faced gangsters in training.

*All the players. All the hustlers. I’m talking*

'bout a black man's heaven here.

How fitting that his voice is the first one heard on OutKast's debut single. It goes to show how Rico took a couple of young aspiring artists, with an early penchant for rapping about girls and video games, and elevated their game by influencing them to represent their hometown. The first OutKast album was indeed a group effort, one that not only introduced the sound of Atlanta (produced entirely by ONP) but also placed the city on hip-hop's map. *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik* contains more than sixty-five geographical references to the A-Town, including thirteen nods to their East Point origins, ten shout-outs to the dirt-floor Dungeon, eight to nearby College Park, four to Decatur, and the first recorded usage of the city's international airport code, ATL, as hometown slang. From Bankhead to Buckhead and Club Nikki's to Magic City, an archaeological ethnography of postmodern Atlanta unfolds over the course of seventeen tracks. In other words, they excavated the hell out of the Dirty South.

With the early success of OutKast and Goodie Mob and the Organized Noize-produced megahits that followed (TLC's "Water-

falls," En Vogue's "Don't Let Go"), industry bigwigs began courting the trio. Rico eventually signed a \$20 million deal to start Organized Noize Records under Jimmy Iovine's Interscope label. But he didn't leave L. A. Reid without leaving behind a benevolent offering. With the Interscope deal secured, Rico saw fit to release both OutKast and Goodie Mob from their production contracts so they could negotiate better deals directly with LaFace Records. "I let them go because they would've had an unfair deal and would've been crying like TLC," he says, in reference to the deal that left one of the best-selling girl groups in history singing the bankruptcy blues on VH1's *Behind the Music*. By cutting the cord, Dungeon Family's biggest acts were free to go their separate ways. And in a sense, they did.

Now picture a thirty-seven-year-old Rico Wade, desperately salvaging records, reels, and anything else of musical value he can get his hands on before Fulton County sheriffs lock him out of his home for good. When the Dungeon Family film is made, this will be a pivotal scene. It's 2009. Some family and close friends are on hand to help, but the Family brethren


who can afford to write a check and make the sheriffs disappear are nowhere to be found.

"I'm being strong 'cause at this point it's just about getting my shit," he narrates to me. "I'm getting this mixing board out this house. Like, I don't give a fuck. We'll come back and knock these bricks out." The scene climaxes with Rico's mother throwing her arms in the air and yelling: "You take care of everybody. You look after everybody. Where they at now, Rico? Where they at now?"

In the founding days of DF, Rico's mother would occasionally question whether her only son was being used for his industrious charm and giving nature. This was back when the Dungeon doubled as a basement-hang suite, a place of refuge for unscheduled sleepovers or a spot to smoke out and soak up the vibe. He'd learned to quiet her concern with a witty response. "Maybe I'm using them," he'd say. But this time he had no slick comeback.

"It made me cry," he says in hindsight. "It almost makes me cry every time I repeat it. I said, 'I ain't tell 'em, Ma. If I call 'em, they'll be here. I ain't tell 'em. I'm handling this myself.'"


He blames his financial straits on his living above his means. For a decade, he paid the



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mortgages on two big houses until they both appreciated to double their original value. But when the IRS put liens on them, he was unable to refinance and pay down the debt. When it was discovered that he was putting money into an escrow account, his attempt at filing bankruptcy was canceled, too.

"Everybody kept asking me about the shit. Kept getting on my fucking nerves. I was just frustrated. Like, if God wants to take it away, He should just take it all away. I'll be alright. That's how much pressure it was," he says. The IRS eventually offered to reduce his debt to a lump sum of \$50,000, but even that was more cash than he could cover. "I didn't have that kind of money. I could've gone to CeeLo, I could've gone to OutKast. I just felt like it wasn't their fault."

Back to the bare essentials, Rico turned "to the East, my brother, to the East," he says, quoting from the classic X Clan album *To the East, Blackwards*. "You know how you have a journey, like the Chinese guy or whatever. He's heading back to the top of the mountain to go back and train, study, and remember the things he knows. That's what I had to do. I went to Dungeon East"—also known as the home of his partner-in-production Ray Murray, located on Atlanta's east side in suburban Ellenwood.

It was as if "the great Rico Wade" had lost it all, he explains. "But I'm cool with that 'cause I'm a human being. And somebody's gonna learn from this. That's what I really am. I'm a martyr. I'm really somebody who selflessly gives of himself."

His mother's words had still cut him to the core. For someone who gave so much, Rico admits to feeling like he wasn't always appreciated. By album three, *Aquemini*, OutKast had become more of a self-contained unit in terms of production. ONP was busier, too, with plenty of outside production work. None of that diminished the foundational role Organized played in the duo's development, in addition to the trio's continued contributions to such hits as "Skew It on the Bar-B" and "So Fresh, So Clean." But with all of OutKast's award-winning success, Rico still can't recall the group ever publicly thanking him. That bothered him for a time until he finally said something about it on a phone call one night with Big Boi.

"Big might've broke down crying when I first told him. I said, 'Y'all ain't never thank me before.' But I never said it in a bitter way ever again. I'm not bitter at them. I'm in their studio [Stankonia] right now executive producing Big

Boi's next album. But yeah, they hurt me with that shit back then."

Part of their distance was also due to the stress Rico felt from the Interscope venture struck with Iovine in 1997. Things were shaky almost from the start. Rico stepped outside of the family to sign a proven artist, but longtime Atlanta booty-shake rapper and regional star Kilo Ali turned out to be more trouble than he was worth. Meanwhile, Sleepy Brown had grown disenchanted. After contributing his sound to OutKast and putting his solo career on the back burner for years in the name of Organized Noize, he released *The Vinyl Room* under the name Sleepy's Theme in 1998. An underground opus of smoked-out funk, the album was issued independent of Organized Noize Records/Interscope—which means Jimmy Iovine wasn't getting everything he paid for. That only increased the friction. Rico also suffered over the disconnect with his former boss and guiding force in the industry, L. A. Reid. Together they'd made history. Now he had to stand on his own, while Reid got to reap the credit as OutKast went on to earn Album of the Year accolades for *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below* in 2004.

Letting out his frustrations on that phone call with Big helped him get over it. "In my mind, that's a person trying to make excuses for why their life ain't the way it's supposed to be. Once you let all that go, then you're good."

It also helped him come to terms with his own role in the demise of the \$20 million Interscope deal. "I wasn't a businessman that was born into business. I fought into business. Once I had money, I had no more fight. Then I became a pussy," he says. "André 3000 said it best: 'Some people need adversity, Rico. You're one of them kinda people.'"

Losing the deal and the money and the houses stripped him back down to basics. Today he views it as a necessary setback. "I wanted to get back to this person, the free thinker. That's how I punch better. That's how we win."

The morning after OutKast's Coachella debut in April 2014, André 3000 got a phone call from Rico Wade. After nearly a decade of dead air from the duo, the onstage reunion had been epic. But there were also hiccups that revealed Dre's reluctance to return. He'd admittedly agreed to the tour out of obligation to his brother-from-another, Big, after years of refusing to perform or record together. But his lack of enthusiasm was hard to hide. And when he literally turned his back to the crowd during

what should have been a climactic performance of "Hey Ya," no one embraced him as the new age Miles Davis.

Rico needed to remind Dre what was on the line. Not as his former mentor, but as his brother. When Dre told Rico that his fuck-it attitude reflected his feelings for some of the old catalog, Rico put their legacy in perspective. He told Dre, "I feel you. But it ain't just yours to say 'fuck it.' And you ain't just doing it for Big. It's for all of us. It's for you, too."

It must have been the inspiration Dre needed (in addition to phone calls he got from the likes of Prince). The following weekend, OutKast came out for the second Coachella show with a retooled setlist, and André traded his blue-jean overalls for a futuristic spacesuit signaling 3000 was back.

The behind-the-scenes intervention is a role Rico has always played well. Even when OutKast was no longer contractually tied to ONP, it was Rico who convinced a hesitant L. A. Reid to release the experimental EDM track "B.O.B." as the debut single off *Stankonia* per OutKast's request. His role takes on a spiritual dimension when you consider how André lost both of his parents in the two years leading up to the reunion. Rico sees it as no small coincidence that he shares the same astrological sign with two other huge influences on Dre's life: his mother, Sharon Benjamin-Hodo, and his son's mother, Erykah Badu. Wade and Badu were both born on February 26, just two days before the birthday of André's mother. That makes all three of them Pisces to André's Gemini energy. "You pick your spiritual advisors," Rico says. "After mom and dad, I gotta be high up there."

With the reunion tour back on track, Rico began seeing signs again. In particular, dollar signs. A forty-festival tour estimated to earn OutKast \$60 million effectively wiped the crust out of Rico's third eye. His vision was restored, and he could see in clear economic terms how much people still loved the Dungeon Family legacy.

"I didn't really doubt if people loved us," he says. "Love is respect and that's great. I love it. But that shit sometimes equates to financial gain. And when I saw that OutKast was about to get paid a million dollars, I was like, *Fuck love.*"

We both break out laughing at that. But the motive behind his paper chase ran much deeper. Beneath the surface, Rico saw this as a way to restore the legacy of the family tree. *The Art of Organized Noize*, both the documentary and album, became his main priority. In addi-

tion to several side projects, he began working on the concert to end all concerts. He had big plans: Book a show at Philips Arena. Reunite the entire Dungeon Family, including Goodie Mob, onstage. Have all the major Atlanta acts that carried the torch in DF's wake perform, including Pastor Troy, T.I., Ludacris, Young Jeezy. Bill the show as Georgia Power, a wink to the utilities company. A deal to air it on CBS was in the works. Local hip-hop and r&b station V-103 was interested. Sponsors were lining up. But in the end, Rico opted to put OutKast's needs above his own desires.

"I hate to use my relationship with them to make them do certain stuff. André really didn't want to do a lot of those shows and I was the one that was the most distant from him. After his mom and his dad died, all I really needed to talk to him about was supporting him. I couldn't be the businessman, so I elected to be the friend. I elected to be genuine," he says. "Fuck me making some money and me trying to retire off of you doing a show in Atlanta."

On the eve of OutKast's return home for the eventual three-day festival of shows thrown by an outside promoter and billed as OutKast ATLlast in September 2014, I shot Rico a text to see if I might catch up with him there. I figured he'd be backstage cooling on some VIP shit. He told me the best place to find him would be outside the festival gates, selling Organized Noize t-shirts.

The contrast of the most successful group in hip-hop raking in millions on a worldwide reunion tour while Rico Wade, who'd given them their start and a hefty chunk of their formative game, hustled merch seemed like a story in itself. It reminded me of something Rico had told me months earlier about the family business.

"The only thing that disappoints me is that we don't think how we thought back then, as far as letting each other help one another. Not 'cause you owe nobody. But because the family was everything to me."

The story eventually ends where it began, with Rico back in classic form, surrounded by family—this time, his brothers, Ray and Sleepy, onstage at Atlanta music venue Terminal West for a live interview with NPR's Microphone Check podcast, which aired in June 2015. It's rare that all three members of Organized Noize appear together for public events since Sleepy moved to Las Vegas several years ago. For a time, he and Rico had even stopped talking, Sleepy admits. But they've done a lot of growing since then and, with all the laughing

between them that night, it shows.

The house was packed with diehard Dungeon Family fans, as well as several members of DF. Rico's younger cousin and unseen member of OutKast, Mr. DJ, was present. So was Big Rube, the poetic voice of conscience heard on nearly every 'Kast album since the beginning. And so was Big Boi, who grabbed the mic near the end of the interview to reminisce on the DF brotherhood and Rico's effectiveness at pushing them to be their best in those early Dungeon years, oftentimes without saying a word.

"You might be down there rapping your heart out and be like, 'Ric' whatchu think?'" Big Boi recalled. "And he'd be like, 'Hey Ray, go order pizza!'"

Nowadays the rappers Rico inspires are half his age and he's a legend in their eyes. Rico Wade still epitomizes Atlanta. When we meet up for lunch a couple months later in August, he pulls out his phone to show me something that has him beaming. It's a video snippet for a song from the forthcoming mixtape *Free Agent 3*, produced by one of his cousin Future's main collaborators, 808 Mafia boss Southside. The hook for the song is a bit of braggadocio in which Rico Wade becomes a universal metaphor for being at the top of one's game:

*Walkin' 'round like a lick cause we gunning shit,  
Feelin' like Rico Wade on my Dungeon shit.*

"That means we still cool to the young kids. We still cool to them," Rico says through an easy smile. "It helps us stay relevant."

His own industry bragging rights now come in the form of Future. The success of 2015's *DS2*, Future's third label album, crowned him the current king of trap. The fickle subgenre is notorious for producing stars with reigns shorter than third-world despots, but at least for now Future's family ties have become bankable cachet. It's Rico, after all, whom Future credits for encouraging him to simplify his style and rap what he's lived. "Future is my li'l cousin and he runs this trap shit. That gives me one more motherfuckin' thing over Pharrell, Timbaland, Dr. Dre, and anybody else."

He's sounding cocky again, like the old Rico Wade. Which is a good thing. And with zero regrets about the past, he's got twenty more years to stack his paper back and another twenty to sit on it, by his estimation.

As for the future of Atlanta, things have changed—but he's cool with it. "I feel like what's missing from the game now is some

passion. But it's funny though—they are getting it. Because what I am *is* Atlanta. So they get it in a Young Thug, they get it in a Future. It's just not as organized."

Speaking of which, he, Ray, and Sleepy have been steadily working on the new album. *The Art of Organized Noize* will be comprised mostly of instrumentals and old unreleased Dungeon Family tracks. But he says there should also be room for some new collaborations with Big and Dre, and he's recently been in touch with CeeLo. Rico and L. A. Reid, whom he still refers to as a father figure, are also back on solid terms.

Meanwhile, Rico Wade's been keeping late hours, while the Obama CHANGE poster watches overhead, as he experiments with ways to bridge the current digital wave with ONP's old analog production techniques. Just last night he was on the Internet downloading free plug-ins to gain access to thousands of virtual sounds and effects for his MIDI keyboard, he explains as I cram to understand, trying to make sense of it all.

"See, you old, you old!" he says, laughing at me while reveling in his own indomitable spirit. "I'm still young, though." 🐓

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# Homecoming Queen

BY  
MAXWELL GEORGE

North Augusta Baptist Church is a humble house of God, steepleless and cast in brick, with a pair of squat towers flanking the stained-glass black Messiah on its façade. Last summer, I got my picture taken next to the marquee out front, which advertised an upcoming Youth Revival weekend—fitting enough, since my being there related to a former young congregant. In the mid-1960s, soul singer Sharon Jones gave her first public performance here, as a singing angel in the Christmas pageant when she was in the third grade.

Several days after my visit, in the vacant lobby of a Marriott Suites in Alpharetta, a suburb north of Atlanta, Jones remembered her childhood in Augusta—or more accurately in “Georgia-Lina,” as James Brown, the city’s most famous native, dubbed it. Augusta, Georgia, and North Augusta, South Carolina, across the Savannah River, are effectively one place, locally referred to as simply Augusta.

“Oh, it was a different world,” she said. “It was a different world.”

Jones grew up not in Georgia-Lina, but in New York. In 1959, catching the tail end of the Great Migration, her mother, Ella Mae Price, moved north with her three little girls, escaping an abusive relationship with their father. Sharon, the youngest, was three. From then on, her childhood was divided between Brooklyn and Augusta, where she and her sisters spent summers with their father and brothers, as well as all of Sharon’s third-grade year, when her parents tried getting back together.

Down south, Sharon discovered music—at church, on the radio, and in the audience with her father at a James Brown concert one summer. “He jumped on the stage,” Jones recalled, and the J.B.’s dropped into something and James Brown started moving his feet. “I was eye-level with the stage. And I was like, ‘Dad! Look, Dad, he’s floating.’” Her course was set.

Though Jones has a fondness for her early days in Augusta, she also recalled the shock of encountering segregation and intolerance for the first time. In New York, she attended an integrated school and one of her favorite teachers, Mrs. Chandler, was white. In South Carolina and Georgia, white adults were scary and mean. “They put the fear in you,” she said. Even the birds were racist. “There was a store on the corner, a little candy store right off of West Avenue, and as soon as black kids went in there, they had a bird trained to use the n-word: *niggers stealin’*. You walk in the store: *niggers stealin’*, *niggers stealin’*.”

Despite memories like these (she has plenty), Jones is not bitter about this chapter of her past. But she is not naive. “Those summers I went back,” she told me, “they was hell.” This reminded me of what James Brown sang in 1974: “It’s hell down here!” Intentional or not, the reference was apropos.

Since 2002, Sharon Jones and her band, the Dap-Kings, have been the world’s standard-bearing funk-bringers. And while their albums are a place where serious deep-soul music persists, Jones—like Brown—has been anointed because of the spectacle of her live show. On Sharon’s stage, delivery and dance moves are queen, and in her audience one can rediscover the lost arts of performance: command, direction, showmanship, sincerity. She could win a room on the hearty and heartfelt substance of her voice alone, but Sharon Jones doesn’t ever simply sing; she sings and shuffles, she sings and dips, she sings and screams and goads and charms and, yes, she floats.

Though Jones lived in New York for more than fifty years, made her career there, and is closely associated with the city—her stint as a correction officer on Rikers Island is routinely invoked—she is a Southerner again. She now lives in a quiet neighborhood on the same street as her old church in North Augusta. It’s been nearly five years since she came home.

Don Rhodes has a faint white mustache and a tendency to salivate when talking that lends him a grandfatherly aspect, although he is spry for a man in his late sixties, and remarkably sharp. He is known around Augusta as Ramblin’ Rhodes, and if you get a chance to meet him there in his hometown—where he has lived his entire life, save a few wilderness years spent downriver in Savannah in his twenties—you won’t need to ask how he came into this nickname, which also serves as the title of his biweekly country music column in the

*Augusta Chronicle*. Ramblin’ Rhodes, the man, possesses two primary qualities: an extensive and ranging knowledge, both informational and anecdotal, and a charitable, if mildly aggressive, loquacity. He cannot help but share what he’s learned from having “written about all this a whole lot,” as he told me. “All this” refers specifically to the milieu and minutiae of Augusta—its geography and politics, its culture and history, and especially its many famous sons and daughters. Besides his column, which he’s been filing since 1971 (country music historian Robert Oermann designated “Ramblin’ Rhodes” the longest-running country music column in America), Rhodes has written numerous books, including *Say It Loud!: The Life of James Brown*, *Soul Brother No. 1*; *Ty Cobb: Safe at Home*; and *Legendary Locals of Augusta*. “Let me know if I’m boring you,” he said more than once during our morning together. “I don’t know when I’m talking too much.”

It was a Sunday in early July, and Rhodes had agreed to give me a tour of the city in his Buick. As I tried to get my bearings, he steadily narrated the city’s history, constantly interrupting himself to point out landmarks: President Woodrow Wilson’s prim boyhood home; the Augusta Exchange Club Fairgrounds, shabby from disuse, where Ty Cobb played his first professional ball; an unassuming office complex that once housed the Soundcraft recording studio where James Brown cut “Get on the Good Foot” and Larry Jon Wilson later recorded “Sheldon Churchyard”; the nightclub turned funeral home, a curious low-slung concrete building beside the highway, where Michael Jackson was allowed a private early-morning viewing of James Brown’s body before his final memorial at James Brown Arena after his death in 2006. We crossed the river many times, and I understood the Georgia-Lina designation.

The night before, I was given an introduction to Augusta by one of Rhodes’s colleagues at the *Chron*, a middle-aged music writer named Stephen Uhles. Uhles has been following Sharon Jones since her first hometown show, in early 2006, at the Soul Bar, a tiny venue on Broad Street. That performance, he wrote at the time, was for Jones “a literal and spiritual homecoming,” and it was the spark, perhaps, for her eventual permanent return.

After dinner at a new barbecue restaurant, Uhles took me downtown to meet Coco Rubio, the man whose gamble in 1993 to open the Soul Bar on the desolate main stretch jump-started the revitalization of Augusta’s center city. It was hard for me to imagine a vacant Broad Street,



which is one of the widest boulevards in the country and lined with stately old buildings. That night it was lively with pedestrians of all stripes. As Uhles parked us behind the strip, he recalled the days when you wouldn't want to leave your car on Broad. Now you simply can't get a spot.

We found Rubio in the sound booth at Sky City, his newer, bigger venue down the street, where he was working a bill of local bands. While casually manning his post, leaning for-

ward occasionally to idly thumb the knobs and levers on his wide soundboard, Rubio talked about the old days, when most of the buildings downtown were abandoned and he threw secret shows on their upper floors. Between sets we visited the greenroom, where the next band ate vodka-infused watermelon from a Tupperware container, and everyone canvassed for the hometown vibe. A couple of the musicians had recently relocated to Charleston, but they were thinking of coming back. At one point, Rubio

took out his phone and showed me a candid portrait he'd taken of James Brown hunched over a pool table at the Soul Bar, beaming from across a supersaturated expanse of turquoise felt.

Everybody I met in Augusta had a James Brown story: the Godfather of Soul roaming around town in his baby-blue Rolls-Royce, showing up unbidden at parties and concerts, hanging around like he was anyone while making sure everyone remembered exactly who he



was. Many people also had a Sharon Jones story.

Since Jones moved to Augusta in 2011, she and Ramblin' Rhodes have become fishing buddies and close confidants. On Sunday morning before our driving tour, he took me to one of her favorite spots, the Huddle House on Ellis Street, where our waitress, Sandra, laughed when he mentioned I was interested in Jones. "Sharon?" she said. "She ain't better than me, but she's good." From our booth you could nearly see the site of the old University Hospital where Sharon Lafaye Jones was born on May 4, 1956, in a stockroom, because they didn't have a bed for her mother in the Lamar Wing for blacks, or more likely the family couldn't afford one.

During our day together, Don told me numerous stories about his friend Sharon. Three years ago, he invited her to the Rhodes family's annual Christmas reunion at his Aunt Holland's place two hours south in middle Georgia, "off in nowhere." To his surprise, she accepted, and she even sang "Happy Birthday"—a tradition, since many of Don's family members have holiday birthdays—in the manner of Stevie Wonder. The next year, they were out on the lake fishing together when Don got the call that his sister had succumbed to cancer. In the

car, he marveled at whatever fate had brought them together, a gay white Southern man and a black woman from Brooklyn. "Five years ago, she didn't know who I was," he said, "and now we're best friends." Then he apologized, wiping his eyes, and I realized he was crying.

That morning, not far from the stretch of highway where in 1988 James Brown had led cops on a brief, twenty-miles-per-hour chase on shot-out tires—not exactly high speed, as was widely misreported—Don turned into a residential neighborhood in North Augusta and parked out front of a small yellow-brick bungalow on a corner. He'd taken me to Sharon Jones's home. I wasn't anticipating a house call, but Don hopped out and knocked on the carport door and Dora Jones opened it. A tiny and energetic woman, much like her famous younger sister, Dora welcomed us inside as if she'd been expecting our visit. The living room was tidy, but felt unfinished. Their brother Ike sat in a recliner watching an old Western. On one wall hung a GONE FISHING sign. As usual, Sharon was away on tour.

Dora and Don, who was clearly a regular guest, pointed out a few souvenirs from Sharon's career, including the framed thank-you letter

from Michelle Obama, whom Sharon met in 2012 when she and the Dap-Kings performed in a Marvin Gaye tribute concert at the Kennedy Center. On the floor in one corner, a collection of photographs and memorabilia waiting to be hung resembled a kind of makeshift shrine to Sharon. Dora told some stories from their early childhood in that very neighborhood, how they would fish in the pond and cool peaches in the stream. She remembered Sharon singing "Jesus Loves Me" and telling everyone that she was going to be a famous singer one day.

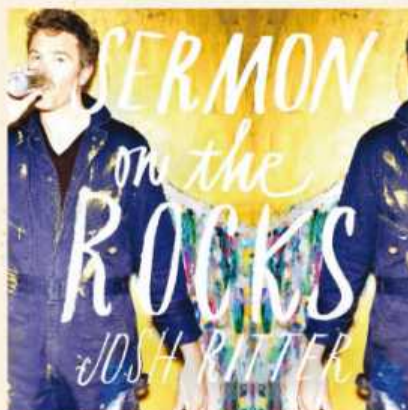
The kind of music Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings make is, in one word, soul, though to really get at it you need a train-car handful: sweet-and-sour soul-searching dap-dippin' back-pocket funk. James Brown is the chief inspiration for Jones's professional partner, the songwriter, producer, and Dap-Kings bass player known as Bosco Mann (his given name is Gabriel Roth). Fifteen years ago, Roth founded the Brooklyn-based independent label Daptone Records with saxophonist Neal Sugarman to create an outlet for vintage funk and soul, old school rhythm & blues—with an emphasis on the former in both of those classic binaries. Roth



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and Jones met in the nineties through her ex-fiancé, a musician, and they quickly recognized a kindred aesthetic. Though she often says she had been told by industry suits that she was “too fat, too black, too short, and too old” to be a successful singer, Jones had maintained her chops in wedding bands and church choirs. To Roth, it was only her voice that mattered. From day one, she has been Daptone’s doyenne.

Whatever you call her music, don’t say “revival,” a term the Dap-Kings get leveled with too often, and one she hates. Many people discovered Sharon Jones in 2006, after the Dap-Kings were tapped to play behind Amy Winehouse on her second album, *Back to Black*, which would win a host of awards and continues to sell millions. Jones resented that a little, understandably, since her own critically acclaimed music had always fallen short of a broad reception. In 2015, Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings finally received their first Grammy nomination, in the Best R&B Album category, for their fifth LP, *Give the People What They Want*. They lost to Toni Braxton & Babyface, who have won eighteen Grammys between them.

The simple cover of 2002’s *Dap Dippin’ with . . . Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings*, their debut album (and 001 in the Daptone catalog), is made up mostly of black space. The title runs across the top in a primary color treatment. Below it, way off toward the right-hand margin, stands Jones in a glittery red dress, and next to her, running off the sleeve, is half a saxophone player, the identifying details of his face cut off by the cover’s edge, an effect that encourages the listener to imagine the rest of the Dap-Kings, whoever they are, in line behind her out of frame. Jones, mic in hand, hip turned out, left arm confidently cocked, is singing back toward the center, into darkness.

I imagine her belting the album’s first song, “Got a Thing on My Mind,” a defiant blaster that can serve as a thesis statement for her career. “I got a thing on my mind / I’m sure I’m gonna find it,” Jones sings, packing the lines with all the pent-up ambition of a forty-six-year-old woman who’d never been given the shot she knew she deserved. “Don’t let nobody tell me my bangin’ won’t come true / ‘Cause I ain’t lyin’ down ‘til I get my dues.”

She hasn’t gotten them yet, and so she continues.

The night of our meeting at the Marriott, Jones was to perform in Alpharetta on the Wheels of Soul tour with the Tedeschi Trucks Band. I was nervous about confessing that I’d

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“Home is where you hang your childhood and Mississippi to me is the beauty spot of creation, a dark wide spacious land that you can breathe in.” — Tennessee Williams



visited her house without her invitation—that I stood in her living room and talked about her with Dora, who told me that I was now part of the family. But Jones reassured me. “You didn’t weird me out, that’s okay. That’s Don.”

She was in street clothes: loose pants and a plain black vest, with silver star-shaped earrings for just a hint of style, which she shows in spades when she wants to. The outfit could be called “fisherman casual,” and this more or less encapsulates her normal, offstage persona. Sharon’s father taught her to fish when she was a girl and it is an obsession. (Although she didn’t know until years after he died, it was also from her dad that Sharon inherited the musical gene—he’d been a singer in barbershop quartets.) That night at the concert, one of her buddies from Augusta told me about the time she called their mutual friend at 3 A.M. from Germany, during a European tour, to talk about how the fish were biting back home.

Generous in conversation, Jones talks fast, indulging tangents and incidental whims. I imagined her and Ramblin’ Rhodes in a small boat in the middle of a lake somewhere, trading gossip and reeling in bass. We had been talking for almost an hour when she whipped out her phone and began scrolling through her photo history. She was looking for photos from a concert she’d attended in her hometown in January. It was a show put on by the James Brown Academy of Muzik Pupils (JAMP), a program founded by Brown’s daughter Deanna Brown Thomas that employs former J.B.’s sidemen to teach Augusta kids how to get down. As Jones searched back through her library for the JAMP pics—“Them little babies is crazy!”—I was granted a viewing of her year in reverse.

“That’s me and Queen Latifah actin’ stupid.” Jones tilted the screen and showed me a handful of blurry mirror selfies of her and Latifah alternately mean mugging and cracking up.

“That’s me with Green.” Sharon and CeeLo had each performed in a David Byrne tribute show at Carnegie Hall in March.

“That’s me and Binky at the Grammys.” She and the Dap-Kings’ guitarist and emcee, Binky Griptite, were dressed to the nines.

“How was that?” I asked, forgetting about the outcome.

“Sucked. I left an hour and a half before they ended.” She swiped on.

“Oh, there go the babies.” She’d found the JAMP show. “Ain’t they the cutest little things?” She played a video she’d taken at the concert in February at Augusta’s Bell Auditorium. “They are tight! Adults can’t play like

the way they play. People think they can play funk and soul—no, baby, this is how it’s done!”

“This is Christmas Day—look what I’m dressed in.” Last year, Jones, who has performed on a float in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, rode in a trolley with Don Rhodes in the North Augusta Christmas Parade, singing “White Christmas” in a white coat and Santa hat.

I asked Jones why she’d decided to move back to Augusta, after so many years away; her visits back grew infrequent after her dad died when she was twelve. After her grandparents passed away, she stopped returning at all, until her band booked the 2006 show at the Soul Bar. Sharon explained that she returned for her mother. In 2011, Ella Mae was dying of cancer, and Sharon—who, despite her great career success, was living with her mom in the projects in Queens—had finally saved enough money to get them out. She wanted her mother to spend her last days back home, so Sharon bought the yellow house in their old neighborhood in North Augusta. Dora, who’d been living alone in the Bronx, came, too. “She lived nine months after we got in the house,” Jones told me, of her ailing mother. “That was the hurting part.” When her mother died, in March 2012, the Dap-Kings were on the road. A year later, Sharon was diagnosed with bile duct cancer.

The illness and accompanying chemotherapy kept her from touring for almost a year and delayed the release of *Give the People What They Want*. She got right back to it as soon as she was able. During this time, the Oscar-winning documentary filmmaker Barbara Kopple followed Jones and the Dap-Kings while Sharon fought and overcame the cancer and returned to performing. Then in early 2015, a month before she would attend the Grammys as a first-time nominee, Jones had to have a procedure to remove a new tumor. “So there has not been a break for me since 2010,” Sharon said.

I asked if a break was on the horizon. Jones told me her plan is to “keep going. Just keep going. Just keep doing it, you know?”

A couple weeks before we met in July, an MRI revealed that the cancer had reappeared; Jones had a tumor on her liver. She hadn’t announced it publicly yet, she told me, but it was back again and she was tired. Not exhausted, it seemed, but annoyed. “I don’t want it to keep reoccurring,” she said. “I don’t want it every six months—messing with the cancer. It’s the worst.”

Jones finished out the summer tour with

the Tedeschi Trucks Band, dancing and screaming—I can attest as a witness—with no perceivable lack of her famous energy. But in August, instead of going into the studio to record a planned seventh album, she went back into surgery.

A month later, Kopple’s documentary *Miss Sharon Jones!* premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival. After the screening, Sharon came onstage, alongside her oncologist and her band, and revealed the latest cancer news. The audience was shocked, since the documentary ends triumphantly with her healthy and touring. Jones vowed that she would keep singing, no matter what. Nothing would keep her from, she said, “giving the people what they want.” Three days later, she began another round of chemo.

Should Sharon Jones get her way, we the people will continue to get what we want for a long time to come. Her dream, she told me, whenever she gives up touring regularly, is to become a producer. She wants to discover talented kids at home, through the JAMP school, and bring them up to Daptone to make records. She’ll settle in at the house with her siblings, get a fishing boat, and finally remove the tags from the new grill she received as a house-warming gift five years ago. Don will come over with his partner, Eddie. Maybe Uhles and Coco will be there. They’ll talk about James Brown.

In the months since we met, I’ve been keeping up with Sharon’s recovery, listening to the Dap-Kings’ latest, *It’s a Holiday Soul Party*, and checking in with Don back in Augusta. Around the time when Sharon made her most recent prognosis public in September, he had an accident. Sharon called him in the hospital from upstate New York, where she was undergoing treatment. “The type of person she is,” Don said: “more concerned about me falling off the roof than her cancer coming back.”

Reading about Sharon’s perseverance and steadfast character in spite of her latest setback, I’m drawn to something she told me at the hotel that day—this cool, cryptic, tossed-off line that could be the refrain to a great funk song. “I know I’m a little older. I don’t know how long I’m gonna be here,” she said, with all her unrestrained honesty and confidence, “but right now, while I’m here, you better get it.” We were talking about her music, and the comment seemed not directed at me but more of a note to self. *Sharon Jones, you better get it.* 🍌

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# Frontwards Is Backwards

BY  
LANCE LEDBETTER

I don't know if the term "Cosmic Southerner" is something I came up with or if I read it somewhere or heard someone say it, but it's an idea I've carried with me for a long time. When I was a kid, growing up in tiny LaFayette, Georgia, I often visited the visionary painter Howard Finster, who resided in his "Paradise Garden" in nearby Pennville. Finster was the first Cosmic Southerner I identified—he held deep Southern roots and felt a cosmic connection to the universe, which he expressed through his lifestyle and art. In the years since, I've recognized this curious intersection embodied in artists I've admired, and some I've known. Pharoah Sanders, André 3000, and Benjamin from the band Smoke are true Cosmic Southerners. Atlanta's Col. Bruce Hampton is another.

Every Wednesday at 12:22 P.M., a rotating group of people meets for lunch in one of the many Chinese restaurants along Buford Highway in North Atlanta. They are generally all men, though not always. Some have known each other for fifty years, some thirty-five, some have never met. The one constant is the host, the man who knows everyone: Col. Bruce. He greets guests with the customary handshake (the touching of pinky fingertips), and sometimes an offhand comment about how many months and days it is until their birthday. He is a genius, in many shades of the word.

Though if you ask him, he'll claim he's from "Themis, the tenth moon of Saturn," Hampton has two birth certificates from a small town in Tennessee. His family moved to Atlanta when he was two weeks of age. Now sixty-eight, he's lived here his entire life. He began playing music as a child and quickly developed a taste for the surreal. His best-known projects are the avant-garde groups Hampton Grease Band and the Aquarium Rescue Unit, and he is recognized

as one of the progenitors of spontaneous, long-form improvisation in rock music. For this, Hampton gets credited, alongside the Grateful Dead, as a godfather to the modern jam band scene—though he's had numerous chapters in his career. He claims to own a tape he'll never publish of a drunken early-morning jam session between B.B. King, Jimi Hendrix, and John McLaughlin. In 2014, he had a cameo in a Run the Jewels music video, dramatically choking on a hamburger at an Atlanta diner. Sun Ra (another Cosmic Southerner) is his "outspiration."

Almost every person who congregates at these lunches has some connection to the music industry. As sweet and sour soup, hot tea, kung pao shrimp, ginger green beans, cod stew, and Diet Cokes land on the table, the topic of conversation bounces from tour manager war

stories to festival circuit intersections to obscure baseball statistics from decades past. It is hard to imagine a person with greater firsthand knowledge of Atlanta music than Col. Bruce Hampton—or a more generous dispenser of the same. The following stories were excerpted from an interview my wife, April, and I conducted after lunch at Northern China Eatery on June 3, 2015.

**COL. BRUCE HAMPTON:** Did I tell you about Jimi Hendrix? What's so funny, they lived on Delowe Drive—Bobby Womack, Johnny Jenkins, and Jimi Hendrix—each black, left-handed, upside-down Stratocaster players.

**LANCE LEDBETTER:** Bobby was the band-leader at the time, right?



**COL. BRUCE:** Yeah, the Isleys. They all played with the Tams, Gorgeous George, the Isley Brothers, and Little Richard. Then Little Richard fired Jimi for outdressing him. He was just a guitar player, but I dug him because he'd dip down and play weird solos, and they'd get pissed at him. We would go to Misty Waters in Decatur to watch them play. They would be opening for Joe South or somebody like Billy Joe Royal back in '63. When I met Hendrix in 1970, he heard I was from Atlanta, and all he wanted to know about was Blind Willie McTell. He was obsessed. I told him about the barbecue place, and his eyes were like a kid's. Pig 'n Whistle was the name of it. We were there every Sunday after church. I saw him, without exaggeration, forty, sixty times, but I did not know that it was Blind Willie McTell. There were four guys out there using two long ropes and one of them was him.

**APRIL LEDBETTER:** What do you mean by "long ropes"?

**COL. BRUCE:** He was blind! He would go get the money and deliver the food to the

car, and they had a rope tied to the stand and he would take the rope, get the money, and bring it back in. And he lived right on Myrtle Street, and so did I. So I saw Blind Willie McTell when I was ten or eleven and did not know it till I was twenty. It was 1969 when a guy named George Mitchell turned me on to Blind Willie McTell.

**LANCE:** Who's the most significant musician from Georgia?

**COL. BRUCE:** Fletcher Henderson. He's the most under-recognized Georgian there is. In 1989, I asked Sun Ra the best big bands he ever saw, and he said, in this order: Fletcher Henderson, Jimmie Lunceford, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and Benny Goodman. And he said Henderson's bands were ten times better than the rest of them. So that's heavy.

**APRIL:** Do you think Georgia's music is overlooked?

**COL. BRUCE:** Always. There's only four states that produce ninety-five percent of America's music: Mississippi, Tennessee,

Georgia, and Louisiana. That's ninety-five percent of the music that's come out of America.

They talk about New Orleans, Mississippi, Tennessee—and you should, because great music. But they never go, "Hey, Georgia has that!"

In a ninety-mile radius you've got: Johnny Mercer, Otis Redding, Little Richard, James Brown, a guy named Ray Charles—that's just the big five right there. Besides Gladys Knight, Jerry Reed, and my man, Fletcher Henderson. Ma Rainey. Fiddlin' John Carson, who wrote everything. It goes on and on, as you well know.

**LANCE:** Why is so much great music made here?

**COL. BRUCE:** Because of the humidity that surrounds us. You lose your stinking mind and have to go crazy to remain sane! Things are so backwards here. Frontwards is backwards. You know? One and one is two, but what's one? Southern people are fucking crazy. And if you're not crazy, you're driven crazy. And if you don't have that crazy in you, you're not any good. 🐔

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# Dope Over Decades

BY  
AUSTIN L. RAY

When I called Killer Mike he was at Hartsfield-Jackson International, about to leave for England, where his rap duo, Run the Jewels, would be performing for a crowd of 175,000 at the iconic Glastonbury Festival. It was 8:15 P.M. on a Wednesday in June, and I wanted to ask him what it's like to be a rapper at the top of his game at age forty. But he was running a little late, and before he could play one of the biggest shows of his life, he had to clear the TSA in Atlanta. He said he'd call me right back.

"If you don't hear from me by 8:35, *you* call me back," Mike said. "That means I've been detained, and your story just got a whole lot more interesting."

With very rare exception, rap music is a young person's game. Even in Atlanta, home to many of the biggest artists in rap history, a city that's proven itself the rap capital of the world time and again, a new generation has taken over—André 3000 and Big Boi, CeeLo, T.I., and Young Jeezy have ceded the scene to the next wave of artists like Future, Migos, Young Thug, and Rich Homie Quan. Yet, at the age when most rappers have effectively retired, burned out, or become irrelevant altogether, Killer Mike is releasing some of the best music of his career to the widest audience he's ever reached. He broke through fifteen years ago, as a guest on a couple of standout OutKast tracks: "Snappin' and Trappin'" from 2000's *Stankonia*, and a year later on "The Whole World," for which he won a Grammy. But Mike has flourished like never before with Run the Jewels, the partnership formed in 2013 with the critically acclaimed, veteran Brooklyn rapper El-P. In September, they performed the song "Angel Duster" (backed by celebrated art-rockers TV on the Radio) on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. It was Colbert's second week as host, so the show was drawing intense media scrutiny and no doubt every guest

was carefully considered. "I kill my masters, I mentor none," Killer Mike rapped during the performance. "That means when I die that's it / My style is gone, I'm a one of one." Afterward, when Colbert went in for a handshake, Mike gave him a giant hug.

Michael Render was born on April 20, 1975. If you know much about him, then his day of birth may seem like a put-on. For instance, he celebrates 4:20 every day by lighting up and announcing it on Twitter, sometimes twice. (His Twitter bio reads: "I like my woman, my kids, weed, polo, and politics.") His fortieth 4/20 wasn't just a milestone, it was an event—Mike's wife, Shana, threw him a surprise party. "Aw, man, I cried like a baby," he told me. She invited friends from all over the country, and all points of his life. "Everything from ex-girlfriends to my mom, my friends from as far back as kindergarten to my accountant, who I had just hired. It was beautiful, man. She told me to get down there, and I walked in the room and saw the bottle service and thought I had honestly walked into someone else's party. I walked back out the door! It was like, 'No, idiot, this is *your* party!'"

The celebration was held at a hookah lounge next to Mike and Shana's barbershop, about twenty minutes southwest of downtown Atlanta. He was surprised by the party, sure, but not by the person who organized it. "Shana is the number one wife," Mike said. "I couldn't see myself without her." That night, she also gave him a surprise birthday present—a second barbershop in Atlanta's Old Fourth Ward.

The new Graffitis SWAG Shop is located along Edgewood Avenue in the O4W, a long-blighted neighborhood that has seen massive revitalization in recent years. Up the street, Sister Louisa's Church of the Living Room & Ping Pong Emporium is slammed on weekend nights; it's the kind of place where celebrities like Lady Gaga and Owen Wilson show up for a drink or a game. The restaurant Staplehouse is the talk of Atlanta's foodie community. There's an arcade-themed bar called Joystick.

Mike got into barbershops because of their importance in the black business community. He'd seen too many located in some rough places, so in 2011 he and Shana designed SWAG (Shave, Wash, and Groom) to be more inclusive—a safe space for anyone who might need it. The new location is painted a stunning bright red with ornate gold lettering on the window. Beneath the logo is the phrase: NOT YOUR ORDINARY BARBERSHOP. I met Killer Mike there a few weeks after he got back from Glastonbury. He hopped out of

his pickup clad in all black (t-shirt, cargo shorts) except for a pair of sharp, blue-and-orange Nikes. I noticed, too, that he was without his sling. "I can't fight, but I can hug pretty good," he told me, when I pointed this out.

At South by Southwest in March, Mike tore his rotator cuff fighting off a fan who had climbed on the stage and rushed El-P. "I didn't really know what to think, it was all instant," he said. "But I knew I hurt something in my arm and I knew we couldn't stop the show." It required surgery, which he had nine days after his birthday, and he'd been touring in a sling since. When I saw Run the Jewels at Big Guava Festival in Tampa less than two weeks after his operation, he sashayed wildly around the stage shouting, "One arm and all, motherfuckers! One arm and all!" I reminded him of that show and Mike admitted that his physician "strongly suggested I shouldn't perform. But he's obligated as a doctor to say that." The injury has taught him "to look at life a little differently, you know? I know my body is hurtable now. I don't wanna stop doing this, so I gotta stay strong."

Mike's self-reliance grew from his childhood in the West Atlanta neighborhood of Adamsville. Although his mom was one of the first people to expose him to rap music, he was brought up primarily by his grandparents, Bettie Clonts and Willie Burke Sherwood. "The people who raised me were forty-three and fifty-three when I was born," Mike told me. "We took a vacation every year. We fished, we hunted. They talked shit, drank liquor. I met them at this age," he explained, referring to his own. "And they were active."

"By the time I was nineteen years old, I could shoot, I knew how to fish, I knew how to grow food," Mike said. "I had seen my grandparents do everything that could be done for us by themselves. That breeds a confidence. I was just never taught to be afraid."

Fearlessness and confidence are a defining theme for Run the Jewels. With El-P, Killer Mike creates aggressive, intransigent music with song titles like "Close Your Eyes (And Count to Fuck)," with bonkers-inspirational lines delivered in relentless crescendo that make you feel like you could go outside and rip a tree right out of the ground.

Aside from braggadocious self-canonization and head-spinning cultural references, the duo's two albums, *Run the Jewels* and *Run the Jewels 2*—along with Mike's last solo effort, *R.A.P. Music*, which El-P produced—are also vehicles for powerful activist messages and political calls to arms. On the song "Reagan," Mike condemns the fortieth president on a variety of points ("thanks



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to Reaganomics, prisons turned to profits / 'Cause free labor is the cornerstone of U.S. economics") but also his contemporaries: "We should be indicted for bullshit we inciting / Hand the children death and pretend that it's exciting." On Run the Jewels' "Early," he uses a harrowing first-person narrative where a stop-and-frisk escalates into an arrest and the narrator fears for his life. For his part, Mike rejects the political label, preferring to call himself a "social commentator."

As Mike's fame has increased, he's become a reliable, eloquent representative in the public forum. He spent a lot of 2015 speaking about social issues in television appearances, at colleges, including MIT, and in publications like the *FADER* and *Billboard*. He attended the White House Correspondents' Dinner in April, where he says Arianna Huffington "whisked me around the room like the socialite extraordinaire she is." In September, Run the Jewels was among a handful of artists to play Banksy's Dismaland, an art-exhibition-as-theme-park of sorts, where Mike held one of Banksy's original works and cried, comparing the moment to that iconic photo of Michael Jordan holding the NBA Finals trophy. When I asked him if he thinks it's important to make the most of his time back in the spotlight, if he feels a certain responsibility to use his platform for good, he was adamant.

"Absolutely," he said. "I don't feel that all rappers have that responsibility, but I feel like I have that responsibility. I used to work just down the block. Come on."

He walked me from the back room of the barbershop and out onto Edgewood Avenue. Even at 4 P.M. on a Thursday, the street and sidewalks were bustling. He pointed into the distance.

"You see that big, square building?" he said. "Just past the trees, that's the United Way building right there. I used to be an organizer for this city in there. Hell yeah, it's important for me. I'm still him. I just got lucky and I rap. But I am still very much Michael Render."

Killer Mike wasn't always as focused and clearheaded as he is today. After the initial success of his collaborations with OutKast and his debut album, *Monster*, which went gold in 2003, Mike got lost down the usual avenues of excess that accompany sudden fame. Not too long ago, he'd nearly given up on rap altogether. His musical output slowed, he and Shana opened their first barbershop and Mike mainly kept to himself. He played shows, but would go home right after. He did some voice work for a short-lived show on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim called *Frisky Dingo*, which led to an invitation

from Adult Swim VP Jason DeMarco for Mike to contribute to *Aqua Teen Hunger Force Colon Movie Film for Theaters Colon the Soundtrack*. It was DeMarco who would connect Mike and El-P. When the latter produced Mike's comeback album, 2012's *R.A.P. Music*, the veteran rappers discovered and developed an artistic synergy (not to mention a rather adorable best friendship) on which Run the Jewels was founded.

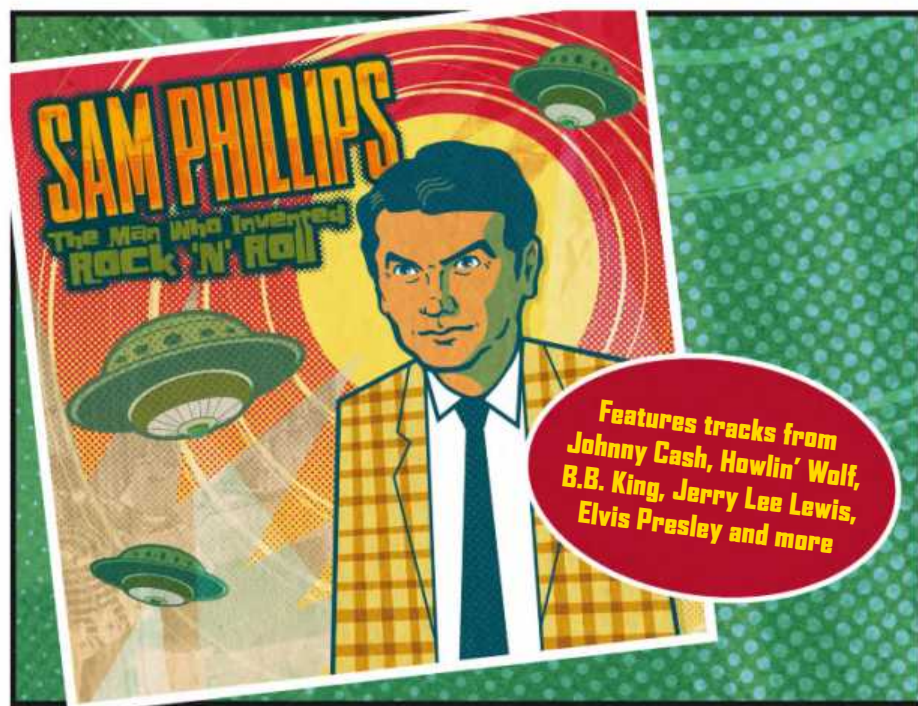
The last few years have represented not just a career pinnacle, but a welcome stability in his personal life, too. "I treat my artistry better, I treat myself better, I treat my wife better," he told me. "What matters now is longevity. I'm not going out and buying brand new hot rods. I'm not philandering around. I'm not buying silly, gaudy, frivolous—whatever hip-hop is selling that year. I'm pretty much just a middle-class dad and husband, and that's fine. My sneakers are doper than everyone else's at the PTA meeting, though."

Meanwhile, Run the Jewels is preparing to follow up on the runaway success of their first two albums. Unsurprisingly, Mike is looking at his next step as a challenge, expressing his goals in the context of his heroes: "I don't know if you remember the time between *ATLiens* and

*Aquemini*, but *ATLiens* made you think OutKast had gotten bigger than any of us ever thought they could get," he said. "Before they came with *Aquemini*, it was like, 'What the fuck could they do? What could get better than this?' And that's how I feel in my soul. I just wanna be dope over decades, and I feel like I'm just getting credited for being dope. Just now."

I asked Mike if there's anything more he wants, anything he wishes he had. "I just feel in my soul that we've got something bigger in us," he said. "It's wild, I'm grateful, but I just want it. I wanna rock stadiums. I believe the rap I do is worthy of that. It's like when you're a kid rapping or playing air guitar in front of a mirror. Whatever you do, in your mind, you see a stadium."

After moving the conversation outside, we had stayed on Edgewood. Mike loves people, and that comes through in all of his interactions, whether he's debating a talk show host, tweeting at his fans, or talking to the young daughter of one of his barbers. Of course, many people recognized him on the street. When a young man approached us seeking counsel about rapping, Killer Mike stopped. He listened intently. And he offered advice where he could. 🐦



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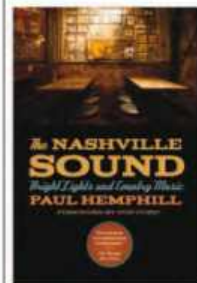
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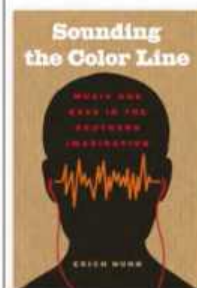


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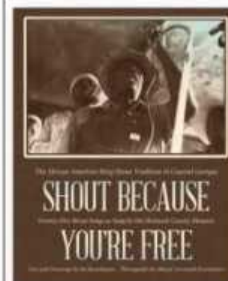


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## Battle Cry of the Android

BY  
BRIT BENNETT

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**B**lack people cannot time travel. Every comedian has a joke about this. On a July episode of the BuzzFeed

podcast *Another Round*, hosts Tracy Clayton and Heben Nigatu play a game that, they joke, was clearly written by white people because of the multitude of time travel questions. “Only white people love time travel,” Nigatu says. In a standup bit, Louis C.K. calls time travel an exclusively white privilege. “Here’s how great it is to be white,” he says. “I can get in a time machine and go to *any* time, and it would be fucking awesome when I get there!” A recent *MTV Decoded* sketch imagines that in a black version of *Back to the Future*, the DeLorean would never have left the mall parking lot. “Nineteen-fifty-five?” black Marty McFly asks. “You know what, Doc? I think I’m actually good right here.”

I laugh at these jokes, although their premise is devastating: a vision of blackness where

suffering is continuous and inevitable. We can imagine a fantastical world where time travel is possible, yet we cannot conceive of any point in the past, or even the future, where black people can live free. In this line of thought, the present is the best life has ever been for black people, and perhaps the best it will ever be.

**I**nto this grim possibility arrives Janelle Monáe. Monáe first captivated me in her 2010 video “Tightrope,” where, in the bleakness of a notorious insane asylum, the tuxedoed and pompadoured singer glides like James Brown over funky horns. Although her sound and image harken back to classic soul, her music contains a mythology that looks toward the future. Her EP *Metropolis* and albums *The ArchAndroid* and *The Electric Lady* follow

Cindi Mayweather, an android living in the year 2719 who falls in love with a human and is sentenced to disassembly. Cindi later rises as the ArchAndroid, a messianic figure who provides hope that androids may someday be liberated. The sprawling, multi-project narrative can be difficult to follow, but the futuristic world she imagines echoes our own. “When I speak about the android, it’s the other,” she told LGBTQ newspaper *Between the Lines*. “You can parallel that to the gay community, to the black community, to women.” To Monáe, the android—part human, part robot, never fully either—represents the outsider. To visit her futuristic world of Metropolis is to encounter characters who face discrimination, as well as to imagine their liberation.

For interviews, Monáe has frequently remained in character as Cindi Mayweather, visitor from the future. (When asked about her sexuality in *Rolling Stone*, she refused to label herself and insisted she only dates androids.) In February 2015, she announced her new label, the Atlanta-based Wondaland Records, which hosts a collection of eclectic black artists who, like Monáe, seem to exist outside of time. At the Wondaland showcase during the BET Experience, Monáe described St. Beauty as “flower children,” Roman GianArthur as “another Freddie Mercury.” Her best-known artist, Jidenna, dropped the hit single “Classic Man” earlier this year, but baffled audiences with his three-piece suits, ascots, and canes. To *FADER*, Jidenna explained that he was inspired by the style of freedmen in the Jim Crow South: “I wear a suit because I need to remember what’s happened before me.” In Wondaland, style is radicalized, fashion a form of political resistance.

What does it mean to borrow the fashions of Reconstruction, an era in which no sensible black person, given time-traveling technology, would want to visit? Or to imagine a futuristic world where an android faces bigotry similar to our reality? Wondaland’s music is melodic, funky, and fun, as well as undeniably political. At the showcase, Monáe repeatedly referred to her record label as a “movement” and spoke about the responsibility she feels toward her community. Similarly, Wondaland artists have been outspoken critics of police brutality, leading marches against police violence and, in August, dropping the protest anthem “Hell You Talmbout (Say Their Names).” Against urgent drums and a choir of voices, Monáe, Jidenna, St. Beauty, Roman GianArthur, and Deep Cotton chant the names of black victims

of police violence, from Emmett Till and Sean Bell to Michael Brown and Sandra Bland. The song is difficult to listen to, a seemingly endless list of names that the Wondaland artists—voices strained with anger and grief—urge us to remember. Say their names. The song is a battle cry, and in a war against black suffering, memory is the weapon.

In Wondaland, time travel is never an escape from the plights of contemporary black life.

Instead, by floating through time, by playing with the tropes of the past, by inventing new mythologies and new futures, Monáe and her artists expand the possibilities of black art and showcase the complexity of black lives, its struggles and its triumphs. Wondaland artists are in our time but not of it, and there’s something beautifully resistant about this. Black people liberated from time itself, imagining ourselves anywhere. 🐔

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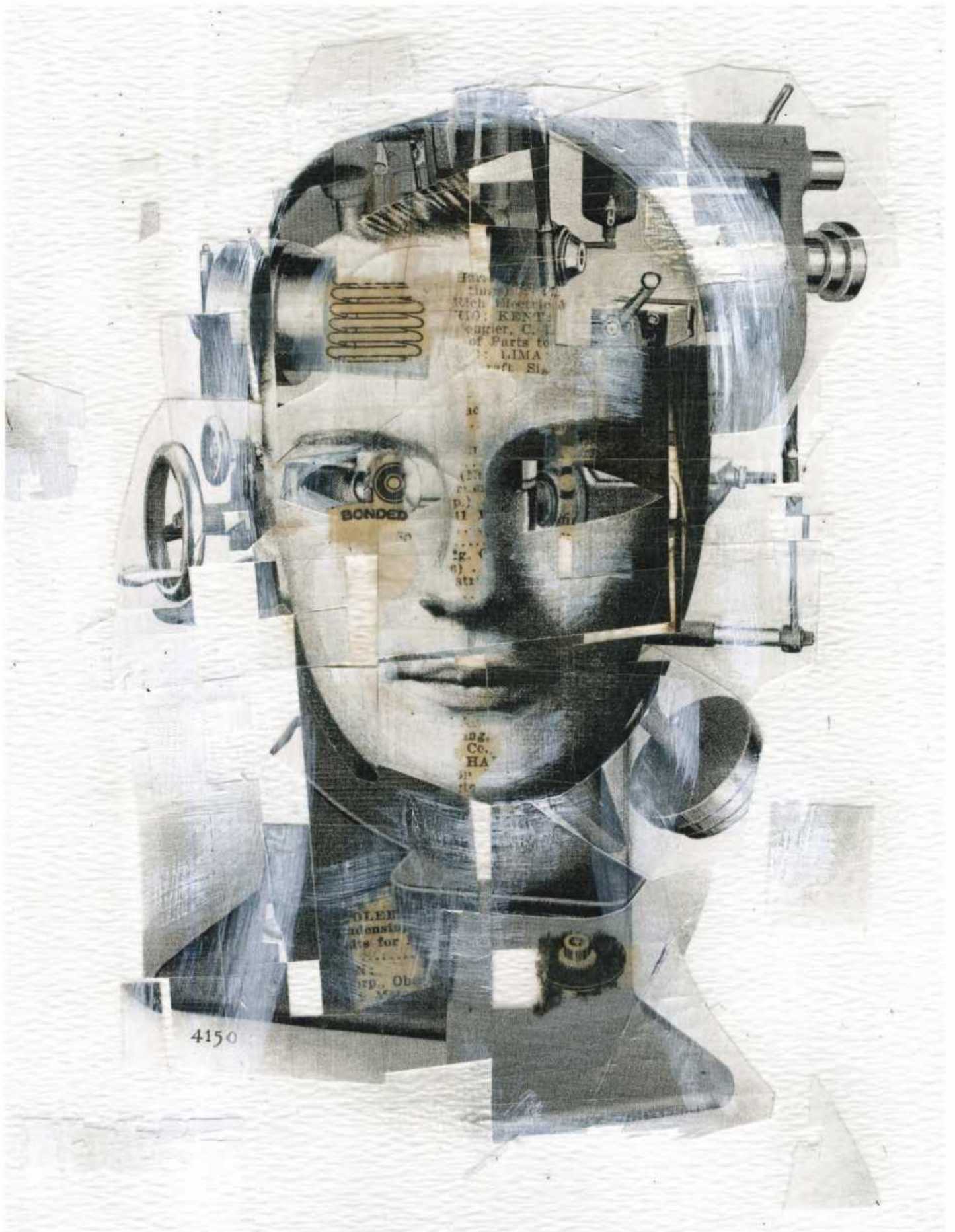
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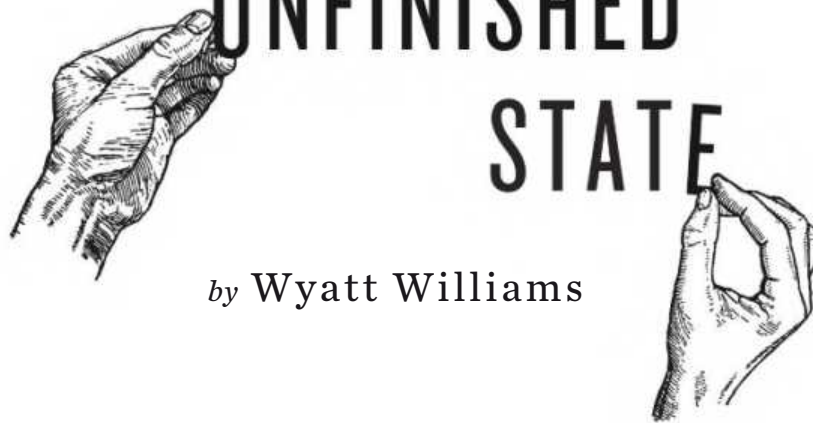


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# AN UNFINISHED STATE



by Wyatt Williams

**T**here's a story that Lance Ledbetter likes to tell about the history of barbecue in Atlanta. I've heard it several times. The short version is that Atlanta's pitmasters never bothered with developing a local style because many travelers only wanted barbecue that reminded them of home.

In the long version, Ledbetter seems to imagine himself inside the details of the story. You might try that, too. Let's say the year is 1923. The Atlanta Terminal Station is a massive Beaux Arts beauty flanked by a pair of gilded towers. As a train comes into the station, a horn blares and a cloud of white steam floats from the locomotive. Passengers disembark and stream into the lobby, their tickets punched from states all over, their hats cocked to shade off the sun.

The weather is nice and money is good because the country is between wars and not yet into the Depression. People are walking fast. They're here on business with Sears-Roebuck, with General Motors, with Atlanta Life. Among the crowd, a man is yelling. He's trying to get your attention. "Hey Carolina, we got your mustard sauce," he's saying. "Hey Carolina, we got your hot vinegar. Hey Kansas City, we've got those sweet ribs. Hey Texas, we got your brisket." Ledbetter likes to tell that detail, his imitation of the barbecue barker.

Lance was born in 1976, four years after the Terminal Station was demolished to make room for a parking lot. He doesn't really know what anyone hollered outside of barbecue joints a hundred years ago, though the story makes a lot of sense. Historically, Atlanta isn't thought of as a place where things are from, aside from a bottle of Coke. It's a train town, a crossroads, a place where people and goods and ideas and history pass through before finally arriving somewhere else. If you ask Lance to talk about Atlanta, to try to explain it, he'll probably tell you that story about the barbecue. In his estimation, it explains just about everything.





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**W**e were eating barbecue, in fact, when Lance told me he'd given up on the Georgia project.

He and his wife, April, and I were having lunch at their house in the Ormewood Park neighborhood of Atlanta, where they live with their two long-haired cats, Louie and Maybelle, and where they run the Dust-to-Digital record company, a small label that specializes in the reissue of music old and obscure. It was summer and the mood was lazy and casual. While dishes of coleslaw, sliced peaches, white bread, and smoky pork were passed around the table, the conversation circled around, too. We gossiped about other record labels, talked about Korean food and where to get the best of it in Atlanta. Some of Bill Ferris's field recordings played on the stereo. Eventually, I asked Lance if he was ever going to make another masterpiece.

Of course, I didn't say it like that. The word makes people uncomfortable. But if you've made a masterpiece, people generally expect you to make another.

Twelve years ago, Dust-to-Digital released a six-disc compilation box set of spiritual recordings from the first half of the twentieth century

called *Goodbye, Babylon*. The Ledbetters spent four and a half years working on the project and founded their record company for the purpose of releasing it. The set was quickly recognized as a classic. Sasha Frere-Jones described it as "incomparable," "the ark of the covenant." It was nominated for two Grammys. Bob Dylan gifted a copy to Neil Young, who called it "the original wealth of our recorded music." I asked if they had any plans for something similar "in size and scope."

"When I finished *Goodbye, Babylon*, I had a few projects on my desk," Lance said, pausing for a bite of barbecue. "I wanted to make a CD of Christmas music. I wanted to do a sacred harp set. I wanted to recut Fred Ramsey's *Music of the South*. And I wanted to do a box set of music from Georgia." As Lance explained it, the Georgia project had been as ambitious as *Goodbye, Babylon*. The other projects were all finished now, but Lance said, "I think I've given up on Georgia." April put down her fork and looked at him. She seemed surprised.

Lance and April have built their record company around a peculiar and bold musical vision. They mostly rerelease old, unfashionable music—the kind often known only to musicologists, university lecturers, and connoisseurs of the obscure—and repackaging it in a way that is

both easily accessible and artfully informed. Since *Goodbye, Babylon*, the company has focused mostly on other people's projects: Art Rosenbaum's field recordings, Jonathan Ward's collection of early African recordings, David Murray's Southeast Asian surveys, revisions of Alan Lomax projects, long-lost John Fahey tapes. These are not typical or chart-topping tunes, yet Lance and April have done the seemingly impossible, building the company into a solid business during what might be one of the worst decades for the record industry ever.

When Lance announced that he was giving up, I was intrigued and confused. How could his home state be more beguiling than, say, a compilation of 78-rpm recordings from rural Thailand? I asked Lance why he couldn't see the Georgia project through. He said he'd take me down to the basement after lunch and show me what went wrong.

\*\*\*

**T**he Ledbetters moved into their house a couple years after releasing *Goodbye, Babylon*. Aside from a brief experiment with office space, they have run the record label from home ever since.

The house has recently been renovated and the rooms are airy, full of natural light, and clean. On the walls hang neatly framed artworks by Art Rosenbaum and photographs by George Mitchell, both iconic folklorists from Georgia and Dust-to-Digital collaborators. In the living room, new built-in shelves hold several hundred old records, some oversized art books, and a polished, gold-plated Gramophone trophy from 2008. Dust-to-Digital's releases are routinely nominated for the "Best Historical Album" category at the Grammy Awards, as well as for lesser-known honors from organizations like the Association for Recorded Sound Collections, the Living Blues Awards, the Society for Ethnomusicology, and so on.

When I remarked to April that their shelves seemed tidy, she disagreed. "You can't see what I see," she said. "There's no order over there, no organization. We'll have to take care of that one day."

If Lance is the visionary, the vigorously creative and abstract brain of Dust-to-Digital, April is the realist. They often work in the living room—sometimes with a third collaborator, a collector or a musicologist or an ambitious intern from Georgia Tech—listening to recordings, making notes, and talking through their projects. "Lance is constantly, totally in his head to a point that you have to snap him out of it sometimes," she told me. "I tend to be more critical and say no to things and shut it down. I think he looks to me for that."

Lance and April met while attending Georgia State University, where they both worked at the university's art-house theatre, selling popcorn and movie tickets, loading the 35mm projector. One thing led to another. It was during that time that Lance started the research that would become *Goodbye, Babylon*. "When he first mentioned that he wanted to release gospel recordings, it was hard for me to understand," April said. "I had grown up a Unitarian Universalist—we're not known for our singing." Despite that, April insisted that she could help with the project. They celebrated their ninth wedding anniversary this year.

Neither Lance nor April thinks of themselves as collectors. They often have occasion to work with serious collectors, people who have acquired enough recordings or objects or information that the physical mass of it fills their homes and metaphorically overflows their lives. The Ledbetters have seen enough to know that they do not want that for themselves, although that doesn't mean they don't constantly buy records or find things that they want to keep. Last year, they purchased the contents of a storage unit with more than twenty thousand records inside. They kept only a few and flipped the rest. By their measure, this kind of behavior means they are not collectors.

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# The Summer Archivist

BY  
A. E. STALLINGS

---

The summer that I turned nineteen  
And felt grown-up in love,  
I took a job as an archivist  
Sifting through a trove

Of photographic negatives  
From old insurance claims  
And portrait studios: a million  
Faces sans the names,

The white tire-marks of mangled cars,  
Rooms washed away with fire  
Or crisp with flood, and then the odd  
Event like the premiere

Of *Gone with the Wind*—we had to file  
Each image we could see  
Under person, place, or thing.  
Were accidents all three?

Sometimes we sleeved stale evidence:  
The body's silhouette  
Haloed on a motel floor  
Near a lit cigarette.

And then there were the wedding shots.  
I catalogued each groom  
Arrayed in tailored light, each gray-haired  
Bride in weeds of gloom:  
Her irises were milky, blind,  
Her gaze was like a hole,  
The roses in her hand were ash,  
Her diamond ring was coal.

But these were just the revenants,  
The brittle shades of love,  
I lifted like X-rays to the light  
In a pale latex glove,

The summer I turned archivist  
And filed the past away  
For some frown-lined researcher  
On some far winter day.





Greenwood  
MISSISSIPPI

The email, dated April 2004, is addressed to the music historian Tony Russell. Lance read it aloud.

## - 166 - WINTER 2015

I hope you are still enjoying your copy of *Goodbye, Babylon*.

Kind regards,  
Lance

Russell is one of the world's foremost experts on old-time music, the big tent of Appalachian folk musics that predate what we call country music today. He founded the now-defunct magazine *Old Time Music* in 1971. The discography that Lance casually mentions at the beginning of the email is *Country Music Records*, a 1,200-page book that documents "every commercial country music recording, including unreleased sides, and indicates, as completely as possible, the musicians playing at every session, as well as instrumentation" between the years 1921 and 1942. At the time Lance emailed him, Russell had been working on the discography for twenty years. Oxford University Press published it in September of 2004.

Russell was happy to oblige Lance's request. "*Goodbye, Babylon* signaled that there was an enterprising and fresh-thinking new player in the historical-reissue arena," he recently told me. "I immediately realized that Lance was someone with what seemed to me to be the right attitude to the subject: fascinated, questioning, open-minded, dedicated. We became friends immediately."

Russell lives in London, but he and Lance quickly started collaborating on the Georgia set by email. Their correspondence is enthusiastic and obscure, full of excitement and praise for this string band and that fiddle player, brimming with long lists of names like Doctor Clayton, South Georgia Highballers, Sloppy Henry, Seven Foot Dilly, and on and on.

Lance also wrote to Joe Bussard, perhaps the best-known 78-rpm record collector in the world, and asked for him to make a copy of every single recording from Georgia in his collection. Like Russell, Bussard obliged. When the package finally arrived, there were forty hours of music inside and it reeked so heavily of cigar smoke, Bussard's preferred vice, that Lance had to leave it outside to air out before he could listen to the tapes.

The project was starting to loom large. "It was Lance's idea, with which I agreed," Russell told me, "that the Georgia set—envisaged at that time as maybe ten CDs—should include all the music made in Georgia in the period under review: old-time, blues, jazz, pop, gospel and sacred music, and so forth." Even for something so ambitiously all-inclusive, there was the matter of where to draw the borders. "We debated whether we should include only commercial recordings or also embrace field recordings made by folklor-

ists," Russell said. "We also debated at what point we should cut off. If we confined ourselves to commercial recordings, would we stop with the death of the 78 or carry on through the 45 era?"

\*\*\*

Deciding when to chronologically begin a project about the history of recorded music in Georgia is actually quite simple. On Thursday, June 14, 1923, an Okeh Records engineer named Ralph Peer made the first recordings in Atlanta. One of the songs he cut, "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" by Fiddlin' John Carson, went on to sell nearly a hundred thousand copies, convincing several New York record companies of the financial viability of traveling to Atlanta and other cities to record Southern musicians. As sometimes happens with moments in music history, almost every other detail about that day in 1923 is a matter of debate.

The most-repeated version of the story begins with Polk Brockman, an ambitious, young Atlantan who ran the phonograph section of his grandfather's furniture store:

Brockman makes a name for himself with Okeh Records by selling more units than any other regional retailer, so the company invites him up to New York for a meeting. On his way to the office, Brockman ducks into a movie theater in Times Square to watch the newsreels and sees a clip of a fiddle competition in Virginia. The light bulb goes on above his head—he decides to convince the record company to come down to Atlanta to record a fiddle player he knows. At the time, record companies were shipping artists up north to record, but none of them had thought to send a record producer down to the South. Brockman's gambit works. Okeh sends Ralph Peer, who records Fiddlin' John Carson in a vacant loft on Nassau Street that Brockman rented out for the occasion. Even though Peer thinks Carson is "pluperfect awful," Okeh presses five hundred copies of the record in time for a fiddle competition at the Atlanta Municipal Auditorium in July. The record sells out in a single day. History is made, the first Southern music recorded in the South. You might call it the birth of country music records.

That's essentially the story that Archie Green dug up for "Hillbilly Music," a 1965 article for the *Journal of American Folklore*. It is a stunning and impressive bit of research, aside from the fact that about half of those details are probably wrong. According to Barry Mazor, whose biography of Ralph Peer was published in 2014, Okeh's recording session in Atlanta was meant to focus on Warner's Seven Aces, a society band that played





When I called Mazor about this, he said, “When people write about the history of country music they leave out the blues and the other way around. They keep it separate even though it wasn’t. People create these imaginary separated

Histories tend to get shaped more like Green's version: the easy epiphany, the quotable punch line, any tricky context sifted out. The most durable stories tend to be the least complicated versions. If you ask about the birth of country music records, you're much more likely to hear about a session in Tennessee in 1927, when the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers first recorded. And if you're looking for the early days of blues, people tend to point toward more mythical settings: foggy crossroads, disappearing travelers. Mississippi's crossroads and Nashville's star-making machine turned out to be durable stories. The birth of Southern music in Atlanta doesn't get talked about the same way. Nobody has ever even figured out which building on Nassau it happened in. Today, the place is probably a parking lot.

He pulled out a stack of Columbia advertisements and Okeh catalogs and it seemed like every other artist was from Georgia and recorded in Atlanta. "At one point in time, we were the representation of traditional music in the South," Lance said. "If you bought a country record in 1927, it was probably a Skillet Lickers or Fiddlin'

While explaining all of this in his basement, Lance had started to unpack boxes. The speakers were tuned to songs





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John Carson record. If you bought a gospel record, it's probably going to be a J. M. Gates. Those were the ones selling."

There were old photographs of young men and women posing with their instruments, proud and preening. There were stacks of typewritten interviews, death certificates, radio programming sheets. What Lance had been compiling was not just a collection of songs, but a portrait of a time in which Atlanta had been the thriving center of recorded Southern music.

"For people who overlook or don't understand what Georgia music sounds like," he said, "I wanted to put it all together, so that you could understand it. The originators of country and twelve-string blues and gospel preaching on record, they were all in these rooms at the same time in Atlanta waiting to play one after another after another after another. They were at house parties on Hemphill. They were at the barbecue restaurant on Ponce. They were at the furniture store on Nassau."

But the Atlanta recordings weren't enough. As Lance had said in his email to Tony Russell, he wanted to create a collection that would contain the whole geography of the state, county by county if possible. Musicians were traveling into

Atlanta to record in the twenties, but they were largely from the northern half of the state. There had been one recording session in Savannah from around that time, but that was it.

To cover all of Georgia, he kept extending the years of focus, expanding the styles of recording. He gathered field recordings and 45s of jazz, quartet gospel, field work songs, the Sea Island singers. Still, there wasn't enough to cover every county. Georgia has 159 of them (only Texas has more), and many are tiny, obscure, barely populated locales. Lance hadn't anticipated that.

The boxes had been carefully arranged, but Lance couldn't always remember what the arrangement was. The files were meticulous. Just looking at the neat stacks, the careful preservation, you could see the efforts of a hand trying to keep something very big under control. As we unpacked box after box, file after file, I could see how things had gotten out of hand. There was too much. Even with the necessary knowledge required to make connections that hardly anyone else would notice, connections that would bring these documents to life, the information, the history before us, all under the loose umbrella of state lines—

*Don't your room seem lonesome when your gal pack up and leave?*

*Don't your room seem lonesome when your gal pack up and leave?*

*You may drink your moonshine, but your heart ain't never pleased.*

That was Barbecue Bob interrupting us, reminding us to listen to the music, the tunes coming out of the basement speakers—wasn't that really the point?

We listened to a commercial jingle, "I Got Your Ice Cold NuGrape," that somehow possesses the warm depth of a gospel number. Then we listened to a sermon by J. M. Gates admonishing his parishioners, telling them to pay their furniture bills. Then we heard Bobby Grant's "Lonesome Atlanta Blues," a tune as lonesome as it was eighty years ago. Gid Tanner and Riley Puckett played "Tanner's Boarding House," a dancing song with an off-kilter rhythm that makes your head light like a shot of moonshine would. Music, no matter how old, is always in the present tense. It has the funny effect of taking you into a fully different moment for three minutes at a time.

Lance calls his creative process "focused

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Jimmy Fortune

listening." It isn't anything like what we were doing, hanging out, listening to songs and talking. He sits with his eyes closed, computer screen off, headphones on, and listens this way for as long as he can, sometimes hours, making notes on paper, forming connections, looking for the ways that music can explain itself. He worked this way on the Georgia set for some years, until he didn't anymore.

\*\*\*

The short version of Lance and April Ledbetter's story is that they run a record company. This is true. They spend lots of time acquiring legal rights, designing or approving packaging, scheduling release dates, fulfilling orders, coordinating with distributors, and all of the other logistical tasks that tend to occupy any other record label. Only, the things that make *Goodbye, Babylon* great have little to do with any of that.

It is a compilation of 135 songs and 25 sermons recorded between the years 1902 and 1960. Rather than organizing songs by genre or chronology or geography or any other familiar rubric of commercial music, the set is arranged by spirit and mood, around concepts of "Judgment" or "Deliverance" or "Salvation." The line that tends to separate gospel and blues—that is to say, the line between the sacred and profane—is obliterated here, as is the line between pretty much any other form of American vernacular music. To listen to all seven hours of it in one sitting is to experience a new story of American music told through the contours, the ecstatic highs and sorrowful lows, of sermon. The compilation is housed inside a cedar box packed with balls of raw cotton, a design that says, "This is important."

The Ledbetters' style belongs to an artistic tradition that began with Harry Smith's 1952 release *Anthology of American Folk Music*. The music, recorded between 1926 and 1934, is subtly organized by the classical elements of water, fire, and air. Smith subscribed to some idea of alchemy, the fundamental concept being that certain materials could be combined to create a sum greater than the parts. Base metals into gold. Plain liquids into the elixir of life. Old forgotten songs into a novel vision of American music. The *Anthology* is, in a way, a template of that idea.

These creations are imaginary experiences, shaped as much by the original recordings as they are by the connections and idiosyncratic knowledge of the curator. Essentially, that's the method of collage, the dominant art form of

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the twentieth century. The trouble is that music history tends to prefer oversimplified stories, rubrics like genre or dates or race.

The Georgia set could have been the Led-betters' follow-up to *Goodbye, Babylon*, but, of course, the Georgia set was never finished. Lance and Tony Russell ended up collaborating on other projects, smaller things that have since been completed. The label has released other sets arguably as good—their collection of Art Rosenbaum's field recordings received a Grammy—but they are other people's projects, other people's life works, not Lance and April's. Neither of them could say exactly why they couldn't finish the Georgia project. They tried to explain that there were too many counties or that the concept got too big or that it went on for too long and finally lost momentum. Songs that had been obscure or almost impossible to find started appearing on YouTube, on Spotify, places that hadn't even existed when they started. Lance stopped seeing it as a financially viable release. That's when it went into the boxes in the back of the basement.

Lance said that admitting he was finally giving up was a way of unburdening himself from the whole thing. So many people had offered to help, to give their own research that they wanted

someone else to use, their own collections that they wanted someone else to hear. "There's a lot of people who have done incredible research over the years that just don't know what to do with it," Lance said. "People are burdened by that, by having information but not having an outlet to share it."

Of course, it is entirely possible that the Georgia set wouldn't do much to shift the historical record. No matter how well a story is told, there's no guarantee that people will listen to it. No matter the power and clarity of the music and history that Lance had been able to compile, there's no guarantee that it would've been anything but another box full of CDs in the Dust-to-Digital basement, waiting to be packed away for the slow trickle of mail order.

That isn't a very optimistic version of the story. Russell told me that he still hoped they could finish it one day. "Between 1923 and 1932, a greater number of first-rate blues, gospel, and old-time music recordings was made in Atlanta than anywhere else," he said. "This could be a set that blazoned to the world Georgia's vast contribution to American vernacular music. In my view, the door should be kept open for such a possibility." Perhaps the Georgia set could have been a revision

to the slights of history, a new genesis story for the whole Southern music universe.

It was getting late in the basement. Lance and I had been talking for hours and the conversation had finally gone quiet. We were looking at a photograph of a couple dozen men holding fiddles and banjos, maybe standing outside the Atlanta Municipal Auditorium, maybe somewhere else. The picture must have been taken sometime in the twenties, or earlier. The men wear suits and ties, their hats cocked coolly to the side. They have thousand-mile stares. Maybe they had train tickets in their pockets, maybe they had arrived that day. Lance pointed to Fiddlin' John Carson. It wasn't hard to pick out the guy they called Seven Foot Dilly. The other men had names, of course, but they might be lost to history by now. Lance said the picture had never been published anywhere, probably hadn't been seen by much of anyone since it was taken. He was looking at it intently. He seemed to be able to see it more clearly than I could. Maybe he could imagine himself inside the scene. We were still listening to that old Atlanta music. The past seemed awfully present.

That's when Lance looked at me and said, "I don't want to say it will never happen." 🐔

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#### Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation.

(1): Publication Title Oxford American. (2.) Publication Number 023-157 (3.) Filing Date: 9/18/2015. (4.) Issue Frequency: quarterly. (5.) Number of Issues Published Annually: 4. (6.) Annual Subscription Price: \$24.98. (7.) Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: 201 Donaghey Ave. Conway, AR 72035. Contact person: Ray Wittenberg. Telephone: 501-374-0000. (8.) Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher: Oxford American., POB 3235, Little Rock, AR 72203-3235. (9.) Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor: Publisher: Ray Wittenberg, POB 3235, Little Rock, AR 72203-3235. Editor: Eliza Borne, POB 3235, Little Rock, AR 72203-3235. Managing Editor: Maxwell George POB 3235, Little Rock, AR 72203-3235. (10.) Owner: The Oxford American Literary Project, Inc. POB 3235, Little Rock, AR 72203-3235. (12.) Tax Status: The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes: status has not changed during preceding 12 Months. (13.) Publication title: Oxford American. (14.) Issue date for circulation data: 09/15/2015. Extent and Nature of Circulation (15a) Total Number of Copies (net press run): Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 33,175. Number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 24,000. (15b) Paid circulation by mail and outside the mail: (1) Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 13,127. Number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 13,318. (2) Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0. Number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0. (3) Paid Distribution Outside the Mails Including Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 5,749. Number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 2,082. (4) Paid Circulation by Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS (e.g. First-Class Mail) Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0. Number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0. (15c) Total Paid Distribution: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 18,876. Number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 15,400. (D) Free or Nominal Rate Distribution by mail and outside the mail: (1) Free or nominal rate outside county copies included on PS Form 3541: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 484. Number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 469. (2) Free or nominal rate in-county copies included on PS Form 3541: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0. Number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0. (3) Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes Through the USPS (e.g. First-Class Mail) Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0. Number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0. (4) Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers of other means): Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 2,065. Number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 1,667. (E) Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 2,549. Number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 2,136. (F) Total Distribution: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 21,425. Number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 17,536. (15g) Copies not Distributed: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 8,764. Number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 5,358. (15h) Total: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 30,189. Number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 22,894. (15i): Percent Paid: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 88%. Number copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 88%. (16a) Paid electronic copies: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 1,317. Number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 1,114. (16b) Total paid print copies + paid electronic copies: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 20,193. Number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 16,514. (16c) Total print distribution + paid electronic copies: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 22,883. Number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 18,650. (16d) Percent paid (both print and electronic copies): Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 88%. Number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 88%. 17. Publication of Statement of Ownership will be printed in the Winter 2015 issue.



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The *Oxford American Georgia Music Issue* CD was compiled and produced by Maxwell George and the editors of the *Oxford American*, and mastered by Grammy Award-winning engineer Michael Graves of Osiris Studio in Atlanta, Georgia.

This project would not have been possible without the huge generosity of the creators and rights holders of these songs. We credit and thank them here. If you like what you hear, we encourage you to seek out more of the music at its source.

1. "Cold Sweat (False Start)" **James Brown** · **Written by:** James Brown, Alfred Ellis · **Credited Musicians:** Joe Dupars, Waymon Reed (trumpets); Alfred "Pee Wee" Ellis (alto saxophone); Alphonso "Country" Kellum, Jimmy Nolen (guitar); Bernard Odum (bass); Maceo Parker, Eldee Williams (tenor saxophone); St. Clair Pinckney (baritone saxophone); Levi Rasbury (valve trombone); Clyde Stubblefield (drums) · **From:** *Foundations of Funk* (Polydor 1996); Recorded May 1967 · **Publisher:** Warner/Chappell Music · **Courtesy of:** Universal Music Enterprises, a division of UMG Recordings, Inc. · **Special thanks:** Deanna Brown Thomas, Peter Afterman, Tricia Tierno, Teresa Hale, Nicholas LaPointe
2. "Watch the Dog That Bring the Bone" **Sandy Gaye** · **Written by:** Richard Marks, Bill Wright · **Credited Musicians:** Sandy Gaye (vocals); Richard Marks (guitar); Bill Wright (keyboards); with unidentified accompaniment · **From:** *Eccentric Soul: The Tragar & Note Labels* (Numero Group 2008); Originally released as a 45 on Tragar Records (1969) · **Publisher:** Dust Index (BMI) · **Courtesy of:** Numero Group · **Special thanks:** Jon Kirby, Rob Sevier
3. "Ohoopsee River Bottomland" **Larry Jon Wilson** · **Written by:** Larry Jon Wilson · **Credited Musicians:** Randy Cullers

- (drums); Terry Dearnore (bass, harmonica); Steve Hostak (electric guitar); Larry Jon Wilson (acoustic guitar, vocals) · **From:** Recorded in December 1975 for the film *Heartworn Highways* (1976) · **Publisher:** Combine Music Corp., administered by Sony/ATV Music Publishing · **Courtesy of:** SeaLion Films · **Special thanks:** Graham Leader, Evan Krauss, David Gorman, Matt Sullivan, Todd Ellis, Valarie Kane, Sam Sweet
4. "Brass Buttons" **Gram Parsons** · **Written by:** Gram Parsons · **Credited Musicians:** James Burton (electric lead guitar); Emory Gordy (bass); Glen D. Hardin (electric piano); Gram Parsons (acoustic guitar, vocals); Al Perkins (pedal steel guitar); Ronnie Tutt (drums) · **From:** *Grievous Angel* (Reprise Records 1974) · **Publisher:** BMG Platinum Songs (BMI) / R2M Music (BMI) / Songs of Lastrada (BMI) · **Courtesy of:** Warner Music Group · **Special thanks:** Michael Steinkohl, Kimberly Cozzens, Evan Shafferman
  5. "See See Rider Blues" **Ma Rainey & Her Georgia Jazz Band** · **Written by:** Ma Rainey · **Credited Musicians:** Louis Armstrong (cornet); Buster Bailey (clarinet); Charlie Dixon (banjo); Charlie Green (trombone); Fletcher Henderson (piano); Ma Rainey (vocals) · **From:** Paramount 12252-B (1925) 78-rpm record from the collection of Music Memory, Inc. Transfer made



with technical support by and under the auspices of Music Memory, Inc. For more information, visit [www.musicmemory.org](http://www.musicmemory.org) · **Publisher:** Universal Music Corp. · **Courtesy of:** GHB Jazz Foundation · **Special thanks:** Lars Edegran, Lance Ledbetter, Michael Graves, Cody Schnieders, Jordan Lowy

6. “Georgia Buck” *Precious Bryant* · **Written by:** Traditional, arranged by Precious Bryant · **Credited Musicians:** Precious Bryant (guitar) · **From:** Recorded in Talbotton, Georgia, for the film *Sing My Troubles By* (2010) · **Courtesy of:** Neil Rosenbaum · **Special thanks:** Neil Rosenbaum, Art Rosenbaum, Lance Ledbetter

7. “Raggy Levy” *Jake Xerxes Fussell* · **Written by:** Traditional, arranged by Jake Xerxes Fussell · **Credited Musicians:** Jake Xerxes Fussell (guitar, vocals); Brian Kotzur (percussion); Chris Scruggs (bass, mandolin, steel guitar); William Tyler (guitar, organ) · **From:** *Jake Xerxes Fussell* (Paradise of Bachelors 2015) · **Courtesy of:** Paradise of Bachelors · **Special thanks:** Jake Fussell, Brendan Greaves

8. “Untitled” *Killer Mike feat. Scar* · **Written by:** Jamie Melrose, Michael Render · **Credited Musicians:** El-P (producer); Killer Mike (lead vocal); Scar (vocals) · **From:** *R.A.P. Music* (Williams Street 2013) · **Publisher:** Pulse Publishing Administration o/b/o Definitive Jux (SESAC); The Royalty Network Inc. o/b/o Aniyah’s Music · **Courtesy of:** Adult Swim & Cartoon Network Enterprises, Inc. · **Special thanks:** Will Bronson, Brenton Hund, Frank Liwall, Amaechi Uzoigwe

9. “I Want the Lord to Do Something for Me” *Evangelist Hattie Finney & Straight Street Holiness Church Choir* · **Written by:** Traditional, arranged by Milton Phelps & Hattie Finney · **Credited Musicians:** Evangelist Hattie Finney (lead vocals, drums); Rev. Milton Phelps (guitar, vocals); Straight Street Holiness Church Choir (chorus) · **From:** Self-released 45 (ca. 1974) · **Courtesy of:** Jeannette Finney · **Special thanks:** Lance Ledbetter, Bradford Cox, Jeannette Finney, Robert Evans

10. “Sweet Picking Time in Toombsboro, Ga.” *Tut Taylor with Norman Blake* · **Written by:** Robert Arthur Taylor · **Credited Musicians:** Norman Blake (guitar); Tut Taylor (Dobro) · **From:** *Friar Tut* (Rounder 1978) · **Publisher:** Tutwiler Music · **Courtesy of:** Concord Music Group, Inc. · **Special thanks:** Wolfgang Frank, Nicole Leigh, David E. Taylor

11. “Ain’t No Chimneys in the Projects” *Sharon Jones & the Dap-Kings* · **Written by:** Sharon Jones, Bosco Mann · **Credited Musicians:** Binky Griptite (guitar); Dave Guy (trumpet); Sharon Jones (lead vocal); Bosco Mann (bass); Homer Steinweiss (drums); Neal Sugarman (tenor saxophone); Fernando Velez (congas, tambourine); Saun & Starr (vocals) · **From:** *It’s a Holiday Soul Party* (Daptone 2015); Originally released as a 45 on Daptone Records (2009) · **Publisher:** Defend Music, Inc. · **Courtesy of:** Daptone Records · **Special thanks:** Hampton Howerton, Sharon Jones, Athena Roscoe, Neal Sugarman

12. “The Living Bubba” (live) *Drive-By Truckers* · **Written by:** Patterson Hood, Drive-By Truckers · **Credited Musicians:** Mike Cooley (guitar, vocals); Jay Gonzalez (keyboards); Patterson Hood (vocals, guitar); Brad Morgan (drums); Matt Patton (bass) · **From:** *It’s Great to Be Alive!* (ATO 2015) · **Publisher:** Pottery Town Music (BMI) · **Courtesy of:** ATO Records · **Special thanks:** Patterson Hood, David Barbe, Mike Quinn, Christine Strauder, Jon Salter

13. “Awake” *Smoke* · **Written by:** Smoke · **Credited Musicians:** Benjamin (vocals); Tim Campion (drums); Brian Halloran (cello); Coleman Lewis (guitar); Bill Taft (cornet) · **From:** *Heaven on a Popsicle Stick* (Long Play 1994) · **Courtesy of:** Brian Halloran · **Special thanks:** Brian Halloran, Matt Sullivan, Bill Taft

14. “The Winter Is Coming” *Elf Power* · **Written by:** Andrew Rieger · **Credited Musicians:** Laura Carter (keyboards); Adrian Finch (violin); Bryan Poole (guitar); Andrew Rieger (vocals, guitar); Scott Spillane (horns) · **From:** *The Winter Is Coming* (Orange Twin 2001) · **Publisher:** BMG Bumblebee (BMI) / Amputated Songs (BMI) · **Courtesy of:** Orange Twin Records · **Special thanks:** Laura Carter, Andrew Rieger, Michael Steinkohl

15. “Tried to Be True” *Indigo Girls* · **Written by:** Amy Ray, Emily Saliers · **Credited Musicians:** Bill Berry (drums); Peter Buck (electric guitar); John Keane (shaker); Mike Mills (bass); Amy Ray (lead vocals, guitar); Emily Saliers (vocals, lead guitar) · **From:** *Indigo Girls* (Epic 1989) · **Publisher:** Godhapp Music · **Courtesy of:** Sony Music Entertainment · **Special thanks:** Evan Carter, Russell Carter, Traci Werbel, Katie Panicali, Cody Schnieders, Jordan Lowy

16. “Potter’s Field” *Alice Swoboda* · **Written by:** Alice Swoboda · **Credited Musicians:** Alice Swoboda (vocals, acoustic guitar) with unidentified accompaniment · **From:** *Eccentric Soul: The Tragar & Note Labels* (2008); Originally released as a 45 on Note Records (1972) · **Publisher:** Dust Index (BMI) · **Label:** Numero Group · **Special thanks:** Jon Kirby, Rob Sevier, Alice Swoboda

17. “Diamond Joe” *Bessie Jones* · **Written by:** Traditional, arranged by Bessie Jones · **Credited Musicians:** Bessie Jones (vocal) · **From:** The Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress · **Publisher:** Odyssey Productions d/b/a Global Jukebox Publishing · **Courtesy of:** The Association for Cultural Equity · **Special thanks:** Nathan Salsburg

18. “As Bad as I Am” *Ruby the RabbitFoot* · **Written by:** Ruby Gail Kendrick · **Credited Musicians:** Frank Kieth IV (bass); Ruby the RabbitFoot (vocals, guitar, piano); Nate Nelson (keyboards, drums) · **From:** *New as Dew* (Normaltown 2014) · **Publisher:** Rhinestone World · **Courtesy of:** Normaltown Records · **Special thanks:** George Fontaine Jr., David Barbe, Ruby Gail Kendrick

19. “I’ve Got Dreams to Remember (Rougher Dreams)” *Otis Redding* · **Written by:** Otis Redding, Zelma Redding, Joe Rock · **Credited Musicians:** Steve Cropper (guitar); Donald “Duck” Dunn (bass); Isaac Hayes (keyboards); Al Jackson Jr. (drums); Booker T. Jones (organ); Otis Redding (vocals) · **From:** *Lonely & Blue: The Deepest Soul of Otis Redding* (Stax 2013); Recorded May 1967 · **Publisher:** Irving Music, Inc. · **Courtesy of:** Concord Music Group, Inc. · **Special thanks:** Wolfgang Frank, Nicole Leigh, Karla Redding, Kenny Nemes, Cody Schnieders, Jordan Lowy

20. “Aquemini” *OutKast* · **Written by:** André Benjamin, Antwan Patton · **Credited Musicians:** André 3000, Big Boi (vocals); with Victor Alexander (drums); Preston Crump (bass); Earthtone (horns, arranging); Darian Emory (horns); Jerry Freeman, Jr. (horns); Ahjahne Green (additional vocals); Craig Love (guitar); Rico Lumpkin (mixing); Sonja Mickey (additional vocals); Mr. DJ (scratches); Omar Phillips (per-

cussion) · **From:** *Aquemini* (LaFace 1998) · **Publisher:** BMG Monarch (ASCAP) / Gnat Booty Music · **Courtesy of:** Sony Music Entertainment · **Special thanks:** André Benjamin, Antwan Patton, Eufaula Garrett, La-Shea Conyers, Michael Steinkohl, Kimberly Cozzens, Traci Werbel, Katie Panicali

21. “Lonesome Atlanta Blues” *Bobby Grant* · **Written by:** Bobby Grant · **Credited Musicians:** Bobby Grant (vocals, guitar) · **From:** Paramount 12595-B (1927) 78-rpm record from the collection of Music Memory, Inc. Transfer made with technical support by and under the auspices of Music Memory, Inc. For more information, visit [www.musicmemory.org](http://www.musicmemory.org) · **Courtesy of:** GHB Jazz Foundation · **Special thanks:** Lars Edegran, Lance Ledbetter, Michael Graves

22. “Recent Title” *Pylon* · **Written by:** Randall Bewley, Curtis Crowe, Michael Lachowski, Vanessa Hay · **Credited Musicians:** Randall Bewley (guitar); Vanessa Hay (vocals); Curtis Crowe (drums); Michael Lachowski (bass) · **From:** *Gyrates Plus* (DFA 2007); Recorded in 1980 · **Publisher:** BMG Bumblebee (BMI) / Pylon Music Two · **Courtesy of:** DFA Records · **Special thanks:** Michael Lachowski, Vanessa Briscoe Hay, Jonathan Galkin

23. “Midnight Rider” *Allman Brothers Band* · **Written by:** Joe Ely · **Credited Musicians:** Duane Allman (guitar, vocals); Gregg Allman (vocals, guitar); Dickey Betts (guitar, vocals); Jai Johanny “Jaimoe” Johanson (drums); Berry Oakley (bass); Butch Trucks (drums) · **From:** *Idlewild South* (Capricorn 1970) · **Publisher:** GA Songs, LLC d/b/a Elijah Blues Music; Warner/Chappell Music · **Courtesy of:** Universal Music Enterprises · **Special thanks:** Nicholas LaPointe, Michael Lehman, Jerry Butler, Tricia Tierno, Teresa Hale

24. “Midnight” *Futurebirds* · **Written by:** Boudleaux Bryant, Chet Atkins · **Credited Musicians:** Thomas Johnson (wurlie, vocals, percussion, guitar); Carter King (guitars, vocals); Daniel Womack (acoustic guitar); Brannen Miles (bass); Johnny Lundock (drums); Dennis Love (pedal steel); with Marcus Tenney (trumpets, saxophone) · **From:** Recorded especially for the *Oxford American* on October 12, 2015, at Montrose Recording in Richmond, Virginia (Engineered by Bruce & Adrian Olsen; Mixed by Adrian Olsen) · **Publisher:** Sony/ATV · **Courtesy of:** Easy Sound Records · **Special thanks:** Todd Ellis, Thomas Johnson and Futurebirds, Montrose Recording, Kevin Monty, David Barbe

25. “Moon River” (1961 demo) *Henry Mancini & Johnny Mercer* · **Written by:** Henry Mancini, Johnny Mercer · **Credited Musicians:** Henry Mancini (piano); Johnny Mercer (vocals) · **From:** Unreleased demo recording · **Publisher:** Sony/ATV · **Courtesy of:** Chris Mancini · **Special thanks:** Chris Mancini, Felice Mancini, Lisa Love, Todd Ellis, Michael Graves

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We are grateful to all our readers and donors for supporting this project. The following donors pledged at least \$100 to support our Georgia Music issue: Susan Borné, Susan Elder, David Hagen, Stephanie Howard, David Krause, Scott Parven, and Nadyne Richmond. New members of the Oxford American Society are Walker Mason Beauchamp, Matthew F. Grinnell, and Bill St. John. 🐼



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Stephanie Lauricella,

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Marko Mimica,

bass

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